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SABIKU BISCO



The Rust Wind eats away at
the world. A boy with a bow
matches its ferocity.

SHINJI COBKUBO

Illustration by
K AKAGISHI

World Concept Art by
mocha



SAVED BY THE BELL

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Illustration by
K AKAGISHI

World Concept Art by
mocha



S A B T K U T B T S C U

*Long ago,
the Rust Wind came.
It swept through civilization,
turning everything to sand.*

*However,
an eternity passed,
and humans learned to live in their new world.
The one thing the wind could not erode
was their spirit.*



THE RUST WIND EATS AWAY AT THE WORLD

A BOY WITH A BOW MATCHES ITS FEROCITY



"To travel with a Mushroom Keeper is to hold their life in your hands. If one of us dies, so does the other."

"We're talking about the possibility of saving my sister, the only family I have left in the whole world! I'd gladly lose an arm for that! I'll give up my life, too, if that's what it takes!"

[Bisco Akaboshi]

BISCO AKABOSHI

The strongest of the Mushroom Keepers, nicknamed the Man-Eating Redcap. A bounty of eight hundred thousand sols is being offered for his capture. His bow makes mushrooms appear wherever he goes.

[Milo Nekoyanagi]

MILO NEKOYANAGI

An attractive young doctor known affectionately as Dr. Panda. He is well-known on the streets of Imihama for his kindness and outstanding medical prowess. His older sister is afflicted with a severe form of the Rust, and he works around the clock looking for a cure.



[Tirol Ochagama]

TIROL OCHAGAMA

A pretty young woman who floats alone through the wilderness like a jellyfish. Sometimes she helps Bisco, and other times she is a hindrance. What is her true nature?

"Welcome, both of you, to Jellyfish General!"

"The Mushroom Keepers' finest. At last, you appear before me."

[Kurokawa]

KUROKAWA

The governor of Imihama, he personally oversees many of the vice-ridden city's inner workings. His orders are carried out by subordinates who wear masks depicting the Imihama mascot, Immie.

JABI & ACTAGAWA

Bisco's master and his partner, a giant crab. Once called the Godbow, the hero of the Mushroom Keepers, Jabi became afflicted with the Rust. Yet even facing his inevitable death, he continues to travel.

"I'll hold 'em off, so you skedaddle now!"

PAWOO NEKOYANAGI

Milo's sister. Though young, she is a strong woman who leads the Imihama Vigilante Corps. Even as rust devours her body, she wields her staff for the sake of her brother.

[Pawoo Nekoyanagi]

"Surrender and await your sentence, Mushroom Keeper, or I'll split your head in two."



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Sabikui Bisco, Vol. 1

Shinji Cobkubo

Translation by Jake Humphrey

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Though the wind may turn our world
to dust, our gods and demons, too, the
one thing that will never rust is our
own fortitude.

The light in our eyes will never fade,
and to this day we know

our blood strikes fear into the wind
and shows us where to go.

—New Song of the
Mushroom Keepers



THE MAN-EATING REDCAP, BISCO AKABOSHI, read the piece of paper in ridiculously huge writing. The man depicted in its center had spiky red hair, a pair of cracked goggles on his head, and a feral expression, as though he might leap off the page at any moment. There was a bright-red tattoo around his right eye.

The image of his face made it clear he was a man to avoid. Below was written: AGE: 17. HEIGHT: APPROX. 180 CM. REWARD: 800,000 SOLS, marked with the sign of Gunma Prefecture.

The flyer hung beside the checkpoint window, fluttering in the Rust Wind, as a young pilgrim eyed it carefully.

“Interested?” asked the checkpoint guard, an overweight, hairy-faced individual, looking up from his papers.

The pilgrim looked back at him and nodded. His head was wrapped in inscribed bandages, obscuring his face.

“Any place he passes through becomes infested with mushrooms. That’s why they call him the Redcap. He’s all anyone ever talks about down at the office. The base of Akagi Mountain, one of our greatest tourist attractions, is just a mess of mushrooms now, thanks to him.”

“And what about the *Man-Eating* part?” asked the pilgrim.

“Well, that’s because he eats people, of course!”

The guard quaffed some cheap booze and, evidently amused by his own words, gave a boisterous laugh.

“Nah, but seriously, he’s a real scoundrel, that one. You wanderers might not be aware, but his mushrooms are no joke. He just fires his bow, like this...” The guard leaned out the window and performed an exaggerated motion. “...Aims it wherever, soil or steel, doesn’t matter. And then, *boom!* This huge mushroom springs up outta nowhere! No land is so sacred that those Mushroom Keepers won’t wreak their havoc. I mean, just look at him! Don’t he look like he’d take a bite outta ya given half the chance?”

The pilgrim simply stared at the guardsman laughing his hairy face off before turning his attention back to the flyer.

“The Man-Eating Redcap, Bisco Akaboshi...”

“But anyway, you don’t need to worry about him. There ain’t never been a scoundrel who could escape the Gunma police. The Redcap’s reign of terror ends here. He’ll be no danger to your pilgrimage.”

The guard tore the flyer off the wall and eyed it closely.

“Heh, his name’s Bisco, apparently. What a joke. Kid musta had some lousy parents.”

Then, losing interest in the outlaw, he tossed it away. Returning to the pilgrim’s papers, he took the final page and attempted to run it through a grimy old scanner. When the smudges and fingerprints made it impossible for the barcode to scan, he stood up, audibly frustrated.

“Ota! I thought you fixed this piece o’ junk! It ain’t giving me shit!”

The pilgrim heaved a brief sigh and waited, watching the wanted poster as the desert wind swept it up and carried it over the sands.

The southern checkpoint connected the prefectures of Gunma and Saitama, and very few people frequented it. After passing through, travelers were greeted with nothing but the sprawling iron sands of the Saitama Desert, beyond which, in the place once called Tokyo, was an enormous hole in the ground.

Relations between Gunma and the neighboring prefectures of Niigata and Tochigi were strained, and the checkpoints in the north and east had long since been closed off. Travelers heading east were forced to take this southerly route, pass through the Tokyo Crater, and cross the Desert of Death into the prefecture south of Tochigi: Imihama. This route was a critical path for religious groups like the Allspiriter and Flamebound, whose teachings mandated a pilgrimage across the entire country, and there was immense pressure on the Gunma government to keep it open.

Beyond the checkpoint, there was no cover to protect you from the Rust Wind that spewed forth from the hole. Whatever happened to you out there, whether the wind eroded your body away or the Scorched Eels got to you first, wasn’t the government’s concern. That much was known.

The pilgrim squinted into the dusty wind and tended to the bandages around his skin. His mummy-like garb was not particularly unusual, as these were the traveling clothes of the Flamebound, whose monks were a familiar sight farther west. However, with the July sun bearing down on him, even he was feeling the heat, and he wiped away some sweat from around his right eye.

“Right, young man. Sorry about the wait,” said the border guard, returning to his seat. The pilgrim stopped examining the dull-white wall that protected the checkpoint from sandstorms and returned to the window, not once compromising his pious demeanor.

“Eugh... Destination: Imihama. Purpose: pilgrimage. You’re a long way from Kansai, son,” said the hairy guard, shifting his gaze between the photo on the papers and the man standing before him. “Wataru Watarigani... That really your name?”

“It’s my monk name,” replied the monk. “Wataru Watarigani.”

“And your real name?”

“Long gone.”

“Huh... And what’s with the luggage? Can’t see what a monk like you would need with all that.”

The monk looked back over his shoulder at the dog-drawn cart behind him. It was as large as a truck and covered with a cloth. “Bodies,” he replied simply. “Not all survive the Death Breath techniques. I am returning their remains to the Rust Wind.”

“Blech. You guys creep me out,” grumbled the guard, turning away from the window. “Hey, Ota! Go check what’s under the cloth. He says it’s a pile of stiffs.”

As the younger of the two border guards headed out to take a look, the monk called out, “I wouldn’t if I were you. We’ve stuffed the bodies with live centipedes to slow the decomposition. They really don’t like the light, you see, and they’re plenty capable of tearing off a finger or two when they get mad.”

The hairy guard looked at his colleague, who was staring back, pale-faced. After a moment’s consideration, he spat in anger and gestured Ota back inside.

“Open the gate!”

The huge gate rose, loudly scraping off the rust that plagued its mechanisms, and the monk gave a single, silent bow before returning to his cart. The guardsman sat back and watched him go, when suddenly the shortbow on the monk’s back glinted in the light, catching his eye.

“...Hey. The Flamebound using bows now?”

“Indeed,” said the monk, turning around. “We’re not forbidden from killing, after all.”

“I know that, son,” said the bearded guard, pressing the question. “But I heard you weren’t allowed to use projectiles like guns and bows. Something about not feeling the weight of taking a life.”

A silence filled the air. The monk did not respond. When the guard stared into his burning eyes through the gaps in his bandages, his fifteen years of experience guarding the checkpoint sent alarm bells ringing.

“Listen. It’s been a while since I heard the scriptures. Even an unbeliever like me gets a little nostalgic from time to time.” Behind his back, the border guard gestured the emergency signal to his colleague. “Mind giving us a little reading? No monk would ever refuse a chance to proselytize, would they?”

The tension was palpable. Though the wind kicked up sand into the air, the pilgrim didn’t so much as blink. He narrowed his green eyes, and a single fang peeked through the loose bandages around the corners of his mouth.

“To help kids grow up big and strong...”

“...What?”

“Sweet and healthy Bisco.”

The pilgrim’s voice became harsh and coarse, like grit.

“It’s a good name, filled with loving prayers. You have no right to mock it.”

“You’re no monk!”

“Say ‘I’m sorry, Mr. Bisco, sir!’”

The hairy-faced border guard quickly drew his pistol and fired, but the bullet

merely grazed the pilgrim's ear, undoing his bandages. His scarlet hair burst forth, exposed to the bone-dry air.

He cast off his disguise and glared. His green irises glimmered like they could pierce through stone. His blazing-red hair stood on end, fluttering in the dusty wind like a knight's standard.

He didn't even flinch at the bullet. He simply raised his hand to his face and wiped his sweat-slick skin, clearing away the makeup and revealing the crimson tattoo around his right eye.

"It's the Man-Eating Redcap!"

"Who you calling man-eating?!"

Bisco drew his shortbow, which glinted emerald in the sunlight. He reached for the quiver beneath his cloak and hastily nocked a scarlet arrow, loosing it toward the checkpoint station. It whizzed past the guardsman's head, causing him to cry out in fright, before embedding itself in a pinup calendar on the checkpoint wall. Immediately, an enormous crack ran right through the wall, splitting it in two.

"Wh-what kind of bow is that?!"

"M-Mr. Inoshige, l-l-look at that!"

The guardsman followed Ota's finger and saw a bunch of small, red, round... buds, of some sort, appearing all over the room, spreading out from the crack in the wall. Soon, there was a pop, and they began to grow, unfurling like bright-red umbrellas, their stalks expanding, pushing at the seams of the checkpoint building, until it was obvious even to the untrained eye what they were.

"Oh wow! Th-they're mushrooms!"

"Ota, you idiot, get away from them!"

Ota reached for his telephoto camera, but the hairy guard grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and ran for the exit. However, before they even made it to the doorway, there was a series of *Gaboom! Gaboom!* noises as, one by one, the bright-red mushrooms swelled to enormous sizes, blasting the checkpoint to bits.

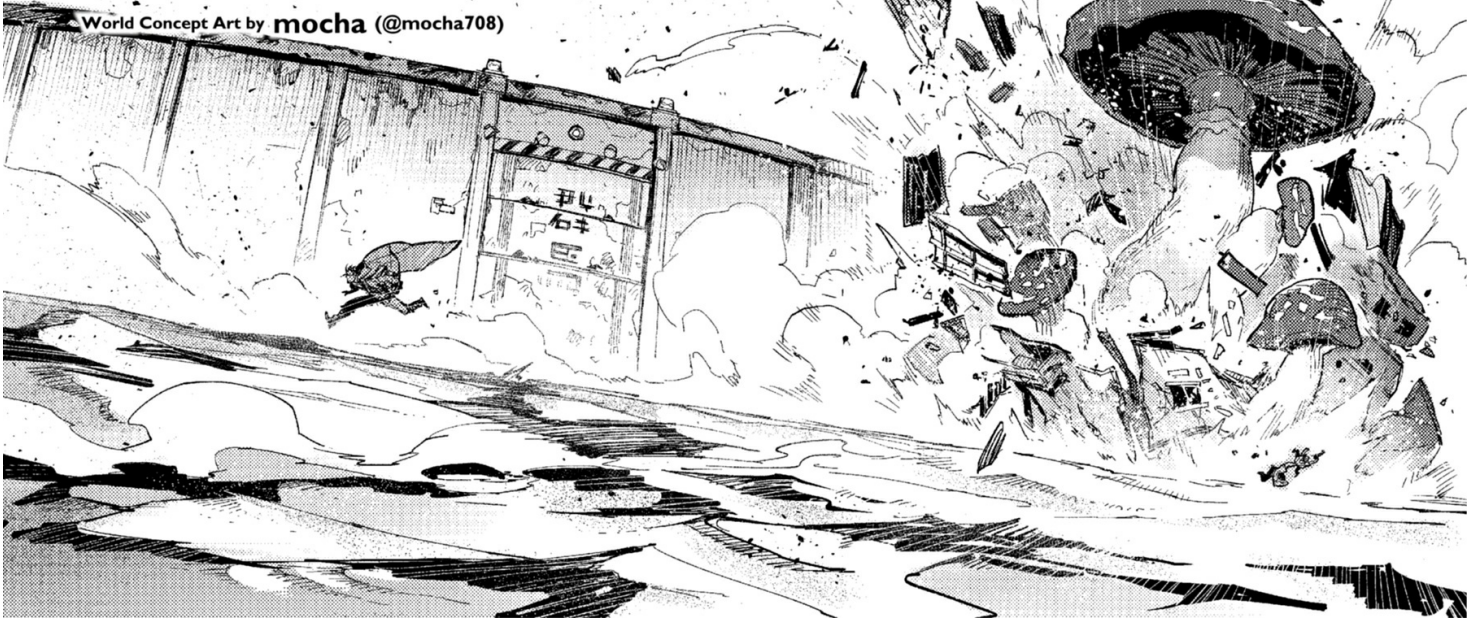
SABIKU BISCO



The Rust Wind eats away at
the world. A boy with a bow
matches its ferocity.

Illustration by K Akagishi

World Concept Art by mocha (@mocha708)



Bisco ran to his cart without looking back and shouted to the hemp cloth covering the cargo, “Jabi! Plan B! We’re escapin’ along the wall! Wake up, Actagawa!”

The cover flew up into the air, and the fluttering cloth gently parted, revealing a giant crab. It was about twice a human’s height, and it gave several spins in midair before landing on the ground with a loud bang. It proudly raised its huge pincers, and its orange shell shimmered under the desert sun. Bisco leaped up onto the saddle on the crab’s back as it dashed off across the sand.

“I told you, sonny!” said the old man with a lush white beard and a tricorne hat who sat at the creature’s reins. “If you’re gonna pretend to be a monk, you gotta learn a verse or two! I can do it—listen! *Jamonkin’nara, hosuyashai!*”

“You said Kanto people just wave the Flamebound through!” Bisco yelled from atop the moving crab. Suddenly, his voice was drowned out by the sound of cannon fire, and a tremendous explosion kicked up dust and sand nearby.

“...Those bastards,” he said. “They’re bringin’ out the hippos!”

Bisco shot a look over his shoulder and peered through the clouds of dust to see a pack of Sand Hippos geared for war, machine guns and artillery mounted atop their backs, approaching in a cloud of dust. The smaller specimens were able to catch up to the giant crab first, and they swiveled their machine guns toward him.

“Out of our way!” he cried. There was merely a twinkle of light as he nocked and released an arrow with incredible speed, scoring a direct hit. The hippo gave a cry before collapsing to the ground, rolling like a ball as bright-red umbrellas blossomed all over its body. Before long, there was a *Gaboom!* as the mushroom grew to full size, taking out the hippo and all the others behind it. Meanwhile, Bisco let loose a second shot, then a third, scattering the approaching hippos with a barrage of exploding mushrooms. *Gaboom! Gaboom!*

As powerful as Bisco’s mushroom arrows were, the Sand Hippos had sheer numbers on their side. Eventually, one of them got close enough to fire its machine gun at the legs of the giant crab. The creature expertly deflected the shots with its steellike carapace, taking out a few of the pursuing hippos, but

the sea of enemies drew relentlessly closer, and tiny beads of sweat, not entirely owing to the heat, began forming on Bisco's forehead.

He gulped. "This isn't looking good," he said, before turning back to the old man and shouting over the wind. "We'll have to use the King Trumpet! Give me ten seconds!"

"That again?" said the old man, slightly annoyed. He closed one eye and added, "Well, at least we get a soft landing." Then he whipped the reins, shouting, "Fire away, Actagawa!" The giant crab turned around, brandishing a vicious claw, and smashed it into the herd of hippos like a sledgehammer.

As sand and bodies erupted into the air, Bisco nocked his King Trumpet arrow and aimed it at one of the falling hippos. The arrow landed in the creature's ear, and Bisco heard a satisfying bubbling noise as it began to grow.

"Jabi!" he yelled.

"Aye, aye!"

As the hippo fell toward them, Bisco grabbed its body, holding it aloft as though it weighed no more than a stuffed toy.

"Snakes alive!" cried the border guard. "That kid's a monster!"

Meanwhile, Bisco squatted down, and with a herculean grunt, he tossed the infected Sand Hippo's body into the path of the giant crab. The King Trumpet disappeared underfoot before suddenly swelling up to incredible size, almost the same height as the one-hundred-foot wall. The crab carrying Bisco and Jabi was launched up into the air like a tennis ball, before tumbling down on the other side of the border. As they fell toward the ground, Bisco righted himself and grabbed onto Jabi, who was clutching his hat for dear life. Then he turned and fired an anchor arrow toward the crab. The crab caught it in one claw and wound its two friends toward it like it was reeling in a catch. When they reached it, it embraced them in its eight legs and curled up like a ball before touching down on the opposite side of the border and rolling away across the sands.

"I-it's huge..." Ota gazed at the mushroom, dumbfounded. Even the bearded guard could do nothing but stare in shock at what he had just witnessed. The

King Trumpet stood tall like a marble column growing out of the desert sands, slightly curving toward the wall. Sand fell from its cap like rainwater off an umbrella, and even now its white skin churned as though it was not done growing. It was a majestic sight, life growing tall and proud from the barren land.

“I’d heard the Mushroom Keepers could grow mushrooms in the desert, but I didn’t think it was true...”

The Mushroom Keepers were a group of people who lived alongside the mushrooms and used them as tools. Mushrooms were unpopular these days since it was rumored they spread the Rust. The Mushroom Keepers were similarly ostracized and forced into hiding. To see their techniques in person was a rare event indeed.

The bearded guard nodded, slack-jawed, at Ota’s words, before coming to his senses and shaking his head. He marched over to his subordinate, who was snapping some shots of the King Trumpet with his camera, slapped him over the head, and shouted in his ear.

“You dimwit! Look at you getting all weak at the knees! It’s them spores that’re causin’ the Rust, y’know! We gotta get rid of this massive pain in the backside before things get any worse around here!”

“Hey, pork chop! Yoo-hoo!”

From across the wall came a voice. The two turned, rushed up a nearby maintenance elevator, and looked down at the source.

“That mushroom can’t live on just sand! For best results, it needs hippo manure once a week!”

The red-haired outlaw shouted from atop his giant crab. Beside him sat an old man in a tricorne hat, holding the crustacean’s reins with one hand and leisurely puffing on a pipe with the other.

“You... You want me to *look after* that thing?!”

“Just listen to me, lard ass!” Bisco took on a serious tone of voice. “That mushroom feeds off *rust*! Take care of it, and before you know it, this place’ll be —”

Bisco was cut off by the border guard's bullet grazing his shoulder. For a moment, he stared in awe. Then his face changed into a visage of wrath. His scarlet hair flared, and his emerald eyes glinted.

"I'm trying to help you! Why does no one ever listen?!" he yelled. His hand went for his bow, but Jabi decided now was a good time to book it and lashed the reins. The giant crab jumped to its feet as if it had been waiting and scuttled off, putting the Gunma southern checkpoint behind them and disappearing into the distance.

"I know what you look like, Akaboshi! Next time we meet, I'll cut out your tongue!" yelled the border guard. The wind kicked up immense clouds of dust, but Bisco didn't even blink as he turned back and flipped his middle finger, giving a diabolical scowl with his jade-green eyes.

Ota snapped the shutter on his long-range camera. The photo that came out depicted wrath incarnate.

"Man... If looks could kill, huh, boss?"

That photo would go on to become the new face of wanted posters across the land, kick-starting Ota's career as a professional photographer. However, that's a story for another time. Today, we look out onto the horizon, and follow those dust clouds, to see just what becomes of Bisco Akaboshi.

Bisco lay prone atop a dune, adjusting the magnification on his cat-eye goggles, observing the enormous wall that towered white in the desert night. Painted across it in big, friendly looking letters was WELCOME TO IMIHAMA, THE CITY OF LOVE! punctuated with the smiling face of the Imihama mascot, Immie. Situated above the words *to* and *of* were two imposing machine-gun installations, presumably placed by someone who had not read the message below.

Beyond the wall lay the sleepless city of Imihama, its neon glow painting the sky a kaleidoscope of colors. At the center of the urban sprawl, the enormous tower of the prefectural bureau jutted into the sky, subjecting the lesser buildings around it to its magnificence. At the very top stood the pink rabbit Immie, pointing proudly to the heavens. The Rust Wind, however, had taken its toll on the statue's painted face, and now rust-colored blood seemed to drip from its eyes and mouth.

The fortress city, Imihama. The walls were supposedly created first, in an attempt by the people of Saitama to stave off the Rust Wind, and the city formed within them. There, humanity could experience ever so slightly what had been lost—and forget the constant threat of the Rust for a time.

“Tsk. Why’d they have to build this thing right in my way?”

As Bisco lay peering at the city walls, a chameleon made its way smoothly across his motionless body, over the top of his goggles, and toward his face, whereupon Bisco sucked the animal into his mouth and chewed. Leaving its wriggling tail there on the sands, Bisco pulled up his goggles and slid down the dune toward a tent below, where light spilled out from within.

The Rust Wind. A blight upon humanity that ate away at the flesh of the living. The techniques required to investigate its cause had long since vanished, disappearing into dust along with the rest of human civilization. People knew it was the result of a massive explosion caused by the fruits of old Japan’s

technological prowess, a superweapon named Tetsujin. However, beyond this, rumors fit for the script of a B movie disaster film ran rampant. Some said it exploded in an accident while undergoing research for a new type of experimental engine. Others claimed war broke out between the Tokyo government and a renegade group of ultra-capitalist megacorporations. Some even told of humankind and aliens wiping each other out in mutually assured destruction.

Whatever the cause, the result was clear. An enormous hole marked the spot where Tokyo once stood, and from it spewed the corroding wind that blanketed the entire country. That wind reduced all of humanity's finest achievements to rust and continued to blow to this day.

With the constant specter of death looming over them like a thundercloud, humankind found solace in filthy lucre and dubious faiths. They erected tall walls along the prefectural borders to keep the Rust Wind at bay. Within them, they could escape the dismal truth of the world.

The Northern Saitama Iron Desert was perhaps the location most touched by the apocalypse. This land had once represented the greatest industrial powerhouse in all of Japan, but now it was a wasteland. When Tokyo vanished, the wind emerged from the crater and whittled down every last factory, workshop, and power plant, until nothing remained but endless stretches of iron sand.

Farther south, beyond the crater, it was not known whether the prefectures of Kanagawa and Chiba were even inhabitable, let alone whether any structures remained. All told, Saitama was the farthest south most folks dared to tread.

The road to Imihama from Gunma was fraught with peril, as Lead Sharks and Scorched Eels stalked the land. It was about a four-day trip by crab, and today was the fourth day, on a relatively cool summer night.

"Ah, you're back, laddie!"

As Bisco entered the tent, the beady-eyed old man turned to him, still stirring a large, steaming pot. "So? What did you see? Any vigilantes out there?"

"No. Security doesn't look tight at all. I guess the wanted posters haven't gotten here yet."

“Hyo-ho-ho! Gunma and Imihama have always been at each other’s throats! Particularly the previous governor’s...”

“Stop right there, Jabi. I’ve heard enough of your stories to last me a lifetime. Anyway, it’s time for your medicine. Take off your clothes.”

Bisco removed his cloak and tossed it haphazardly aside. Jabi lifted his spoon to his mouth to taste the broth, ignoring his words.

“Jabi! How many times do I have to tell you?! We check your Rust first! *Then* you can eat!”

“Calm down, sonny, I’m just giving it a little taste! Let me have my pleasures before shuffling off this mortal coil!”

“You shuffling off your mortal coil is exactly what I’m trying to *prevent*,” replied Bisco. “Now stop complaining and get over here.”

Faced with Bisco’s overpowering glare, Jabi submitted and meekly removed his cloak and top. Bisco nimbly removed the bandages from around the old man’s upper torso, revealing the Rust eating away at his withering flesh.

“...”

Bisco frowned. He ran his finger over the Rust infecting his master’s skin. It started at his neck, going down his right shoulder and covering the top of his arm and most of the right half of his chest.

“See, laddie? Nothing to worry about! I’m fit as a fiddle! I can even raise my arm, look!”

“Don’t talk nonsense. I’m surprised it hasn’t snapped off. I don’t know how you’re still alive.”

Bisco administered an injection made of wortshrooms, before replacing Jabi’s bandages.

“We don’t have much time left,” he muttered under his breath. “Once it reaches your lungs...”

“Don’t look so down, Bisco, my boy. Here, have something to eat! Mmm, delicious!”

Jabi quickly put his cloak back on before tasting the stew and pouring it into a bowl.

“You’re in for a real treat tonight; there’s tons of rat fat in it. Eat it all up, or you’ll be too weak to draw that bowstring when it really matters!”

It was like his imminent death was of no consequence. Bisco sighed at his master’s flippancy before sitting down cross-legged on the sand and taking his bowl.

Tonight’s meal was an ocher soup made by mincing the meat of ironrats and sandworms, making them into dumplings, and stewing them with dried hen-of-the-woods mushrooms. The modest meats were the result of the day’s sand fishing, a method consisting in firing paralyzing nettle arrows into the sands and netting any curious critters that took a bite. Of course, most of the creatures that lived in the sands were so infected by the Rust as to be rendered nigh inedible, and their meat tasted overwhelmingly of iron, but Bisco was in no position to be picky.

There were certainly dos and don’ts when it came to Mushroom Keeper cuisine. For example, when cooking sandworm, it was important to steep it in water to remove all the sand particles. The longer you spent preparing it, the better it would taste.

“...Ugh! Agh! Gah! There’s something bitter in this!” Bisco coughed. “Are you sure you gutted it right?”

“You’re not supposed to chew it, my boy! Slurp it down in one gulp, like me!”

“Don’t give me that crap. You just can’t chew because you’ve got no teeth!”

“Hyo-ho-ho!”

The shriveled-up, goggle-eyed old man cared not for such things. This was the hero of the Mushroom Keepers, the man who took Bisco in as his own son and trained him to be a master. Jabi gifted Bisco with his own bowmanship, techniques that had earned him the title of Godbow in earlier life, and that gave Bisco skills far beyond his years—and none could ride a steelcrab like Jabi could, either.

And yet even he could not prevent the Rust from eating away at his body. He

didn't have much time left.

"Jabi, normal mushrooms aren't gonna cut it anymore. We need to hurry up and find the Rust-Eater before it's too late."

"..."

"Once we get past Imihama, there's no more checkpoints. It's a straight shot to Akita."

The Rust-Eater. A miraculous mushroom that could cure the Rust instantly and return damaged flesh to normal. Even among the Mushroom Keepers, it was thought to be a myth. They told stories of how it had been used to save a dying village about to be destroyed by the Rust, but the only person who still remembered where it could be found and how to make it grow was Jabi.

"Bisco."

"Huh?" Bisco looked up from his meal, slurping down a rat's tail from the corner of his mouth. Jabi, who usually lived in a world of his own, smiled with an uncharacteristic air, and his words were gentle and deliberate.

"I've taught you all I know. About mushrooms, crab riding, archery... With the bow, I daresay you have me beat, in fact."

As Bisco listened to his master speak, his expression hardened.

"It's just medicine you were never any good at, heh! But even so, there's no other Mushroom Keeper alive who can do the things you can. There's just...one more thing I'd like to say."

Jabi paused and looked Bisco dead in the eye.

"Bisco, when I die..."

"Stop it."

"Bisco, listen to me..."

"No, stop it! Shut up!" Bisco slammed his bowl of stew on the floor and rose to his feet. His teeth were clenched, and behind his pointed glare, his emerald eyes trembled. "What do you think we've been working for? Why do you think we snuck through all those checkpoints? It was all for you—don't you realize

that?! Or do you not care if the Rust kills you?!”

“Hyo-ho-ho... That was fun. Remember Chiga, at Mt. Hiei? We used that cable from a cable car to swing over that checkpoint, remember...?”

“What do you think this is, a field trip?!” Bisco roared, grabbing Jabi by the lapels and glaring daggers at him. But those daggers seemed to get swallowed up by Jabi’s gentle eyes, and Bisco could do nothing but bite his lip and let him go in frustration.

“...I’m not dragging you along just so you can die on me,” he said, spitting out the words, before pulling on his cloak and heading to the door of the tent. “Next time I catch you talking shit like that...I’ll tear you a new one.”

With one last look at Jabi, Bisco walked out into the night, angrily zipping shut the flap behind him. The flames of the stove flickered, and Bisco’s neglected bowl cast a dancing shadow onto the floor of the tent.

“...He’s such a good kid,” murmured Jabi to himself as he cleaned up the bowls. “But, Bisco, soon I’ll be gone, and there’ll be no one left to take care of you.”

After that, someone... Please, someone...

Jabi could not finish his thought. He simply stared down into the flames with his large black eyes.

Bisco’s cloak billowed as the wind scattered dust and sand into the air. Shielding his eyes, he went around the back of the tent, where the giant crab was milling about freely.

“You eat yet, Actagawa?” asked Bisco, peering into the animal’s feed bucket. Sure enough, it was empty. Bisco didn’t know whether crabs ever felt stressed like humans did, but he had never known Actagawa to be unruly, at least. He was like a brother to Bisco, and the two had known each other since they were very little.

Bisco sat down against Actagawa’s belly and peered up at his inscrutable features.

“...Look at you, Actagawa. Nothing ever gets you down, does it? Must be nice.

Wish I was a crab, too... Actually, scratch that. I couldn't stand carrying people around on my back."

It was unclear whether Actagawa was listening. There was just a faint pop as he blew a bubble from his mouth. Bisco chuckled, before drawing his cloak over his body and nestling into Actagawa's embrace. There, he closed his eyes.

Bisco had almost managed to fall asleep when there was a sudden movement as Actagawa rose. Bisco rushed back to consciousness before leaping to his feet, alert, and signaling for Actagawa to get down.

It was as though a loud noise had rang out in the night. In the desert, there was an ominous presence, and it was obvious to a seasoned Mushroom Keeper such as Bisco that something very unnatural was approaching.

Bisco stared out over the sands toward the source. There in the sky, a large, eerily silent shape of some kind was gliding directly toward the camp.

"What is that...?"

Suddenly, there was a burst of sound, and something sliced through the air with such an intensity that it woke Bisco up the rest of the way. He pulled down his cat-eye goggles to see a long, thin white tube, with smoke shooting from the rear, hurtling toward Actagawa.

"What the...?!"

Bisco drew his bow, lined up the object, and fired. His arrow struck the tube dead-on, and it wobbled a bit in the air before falling to the ground and detonating in a massive explosion.

"A rocket?!" Bisco's sweat glistened in the fiery light of the blast. "Dammit, what's going on? Actagawa, protect Jabi!"

After watching him leave, Bisco turned his attention back out over the desert, where the light from the blast illuminated an enormous military aircraft in the distance. As it sailed through the air, kicking up a ton of dust behind it, Bisco could see something strange and soft squirming around between the two wings, with two antennae atop its head. Painted onto the spiral shell on its back was a familiar star-shaped logo.

“Matoba Ironworks...! But why?”

“Bisco!” shouted Jabi, grasping Actagawa’s reins. “The puke’s coming—hide under Actagawa, quick!”

As if on cue, the snail seemed to inflate before launching a horrible-looking pink liquid right where Bisco was standing. He broke into a dash, moments before the noxious fluid hit the ground behind him and started to eat away at the very sand beneath his feet. The liquid closed in on the fleeing Bisco, melting rock and bending steel.

Bisco reached Actagawa and crawled into hiding just as the acidic gunk poured down on the crab’s back, sizzling and giving off white smoke. However, Actagawa’s formidable shell managed to fend off the vomit bombardment, successfully protecting his two masters.

The dark shadow flew over them and continued on in the other direction.

“An Escargot Plane,” Jabi shouted over the roar of the engines as he cast a glance toward the rapidly dissolving tent. “It’s not in Imihama’s colors. What’s it doing here?!”

The Rust Wind caused any precise mechanical equipment to clog up and stop working almost immediately. These days, many prefectures adopted so-called animal weaponry, which used organic engines created from new and exotic life-forms. These life-forms evolved naturally to be resistant to the Rust Wind, and manufacturing companies were quick to put them to good use. The Sand Hippos from earlier were another example of this. This bomber, however, was of a much larger scale, utilizing the near-limitless energy of a mollusk known as the platinum snail to achieve flight while carrying a hefty amount of weaponry on board.

“It’s coming around, Bisco! Your arrows ain’t gonna leave a scratch! Get to Imihama, pronto!”

The Escargot Plane bore down on the pair once more and, with a puff of white smoke, released another missile. Bisco watched as Jabi expertly aimed his bow and shot it out of the sky.

“What do you have against us?! Why are you following us?!” he said, grinding

his teeth. As he ran, he grabbed an arrow in retaliation and pulled back his emerald bow. Anger flooded his heart, and the veteran Bisco let his attention wander, just for a moment.

Suddenly, a sharp pain ran through his foot. He had been so distracted by the Escargot Plane that he had failed to notice the eel that leaped out of the sands and sank its fangs into his ankle. Bisco let his arrow fall, and the Escargot Plane turned its attention on him. He immediately crushed the eel with his fist, but the poison was beginning to take effect, and already Bisco could feel his leg going numb.

“Dammit, my leg...!”

The plane aimed the two machine guns atop its wings at Bisco and fired. But a small shadow leaped across the desert and pushed him aside at the very last moment.

“Ah...!”

The plane’s guns left a trail of little holes in the ground. Along with the roar of the engines overhead, there was the sickening sound of tearing flesh, and the sand was streaked with blood. After the Escargot Plane passed, the moonlight illuminated the tattered cloak of the fallen shadow.

“Bisco... Run...”

“Nooo! Jabi!” screamed Bisco as the Escargot Plane came around for another run. The snail’s slimy head glistened under the night sky.

Bisco’s green eyes shone. His hair bristled with rage, and he glowered up at the heavens with a look of pure enmity that would stop the devil himself in his tracks. He slowly pulled back his bow to full draw, putting everything he had into this one single arrow.

“You bastaaaard!” he roared.

There was a flicker of light as his arrow split the sky. It struck the flank of the plane as it was banking, right in the center of the star-shaped logo of Matoba Ironworks. The impressive iron plating buckled before yielding entirely as the steel poison arrow passed clean through and out the other side, disappearing into the night without even slowing down.

The fuselage of the plane was bent in two like a snapped twig, as though a huge cannonball had crashed into the side of it, denting its thick armor.

This wasn't something that could just be called a good shot. This was something more. Something beyond a level a human should be able to accomplish.

The Escargot Plane groaned and scattered pink venom everywhere. It shook its head from side to side in pain at the unexpected attack and at the fungus eating away at its body. There was a great *Gaboom!* as the mushrooms exploded in size, tearing off the iron plating, and the Escargot Plane fell to earth and crashed. Like a skimming stone, it bounced off the sand and skidded nearly fifty meters before finally coming to a halt, whereupon it went up in a ball of flames.

"Jabi! Jabi! Oh god, the blood... Jabi, stay with me! Don't die!"

As the flaming wreckage lit up the landscape, Bisco ran over to Jabi and tried to hold him in his arms, but as his hands touched warm, wet blood, his face went pale.

"Uuurghh... I told ya to run, son! I could have taken that thing out in one shot... Well done, my... Guh! Gah!"

His white hair was stained red.

"Don't talk, Jabi! I'll get you to Imihama; we'll find a doctor there! Jabi would... Jabi would never die in a place like this!"

"What...a niiice...shot..."

Jabi's eyes glazed over as though he was dreaming, and he babbled incoherently.

"That arrow was you, you know. Flying through the air, breaking down everything in your way..."

As he met the eyes of his favorite student, he continued as if in song.

"...Find your bow, Bisco. Find the bow for you..."

His trembling finger brushed softly against Bisco's cheek, drawing a line of blood. Then the last of his strength left him, and he fell into unconsciousness.

Bisco cradled the old man in his arms and sobbed silently. Two, three teardrops wet the desert sands, then on the fourth, Bisco dried his eyes, fastened his dying teacher to his back, and leaped atop Actagawa's back as the giant crab galloped over.

"I'll save you, Jabi! Don't you die on me!"

Any vestige of the tears he just shed were gone, the stains swallowed up by the scorching sands. Bisco's eyes were enveloped in the fires of determination as Actagawa shot across the dunes like an arrow toward the neon lights of Imihama.

It was past eight o'clock in the evening. The narrow streets of the lower city were filled with religious brothels with names like Deliverance of the Flesh and Ecstasy and Rapture. Their tacky neon signs were everywhere, and the air smelled of cooking oil and cheap perfume.

There were baskets filled to the brim with sickly sweet mountain yuzu and snake mandarins, shops selling mirrors and *daruma* dolls for good luck, cauldrons for mixing up hexes and demon-repelling incense burners, the authenticity of which remained very much in doubt. Next to them, a stall was packed with old manga volumes excavated from the ruins. On the front cover, a smiling boy leaped through the air, striking a powerful pose bursting with energy.

The voices of the vendors hawking the goods rang out over the street, and the bustling crowd was louder still. This place was a far cry from any semblance of civility. Yet Milo was rather fond of these boisterous streets all the same. With his hood pulled low, he made his way through the crowd with practiced ease. He passed by a couple of brothels before suddenly turning down an alley arriving at a food stall selling steamed buns. The smell wafting from the cart alongside clouds of billowing white steam got his appetite going. Milo caught his breath before checking the money he had in his pocket and sticking his head through the little curtain.

"Good evening."

"Welcome. Oh, Doctor!" The proprietor stamped out the cigarette he was smoking and smiled at the familiar face. "You're running a little late. I've saved two gators for you."

"Today... Hmm, let's see. I'll take two mantis shrimp as well, please," came the gentle, pleasant voice from beneath the hood. "My sister is feeling better today, and I'd like for her to eat while she can."

“Well, that’s the most important thing,” replied the proprietor, opening the steamer and releasing a ripple of white clouds. “There’s no illness that can’t be cured with my steamed buns and your medical expertise. Here, two gator meat and two shrimp paste.”

Milo gave a lonely smile and took the bag containing the buns. Then he lowered his voice as if to make sure nobody heard and whispered in the proprietor’s ear.

“Do you have the...uh, stuff?”

“Yep. You sure are an odd one, Doctor. Well, not like I have any idea what to do with the stuff. I guess they’re best in your capable hands.”

The proprietor took several mushrooms from behind the counter and held them out. When Milo nodded, he wrapped them in paper and gave him the package.

“Don’t let ’em catch you with that. If you get pinched, this town’s done for.”

“Thank you! It’s not much, but here...”

“Keep your money, Doctor. You didn’t ask me for anything when you helped my daughter...”

Milo smiled and pressed his finger to his lips before placing the coins inside the proprietor’s breast pocket.

“Come back again when you run out of medicine,” said Milo. “On Wednesdays, after the council meeting...”

Before he could finish speaking, something small rushed out of the shadows toward him and snatched the bag of steamed buns from his hands. Milo was knocked aside and made eye contact with the figure as they turned to look back over their shoulder. It was a child, dressed in ragged clothes, with messy hair, but a burning look in their eyes. The child ran out into the main road, disappearing into the crowd.

“Wait a minute...!”

“Thief! Somebody stop that kid!” shouted the food stall owner. But before he had even finished, Milo sprinted into the crowd after them. He deftly waded

through the sea of people, catching up to the child. Taken aback by the skill of his pursuer, the thief overturned an orange cart, sending fruit sprawling, before running along the top of the stalls and disappearing into a side alley. A little while later, Milo rounded the corner and stopped.

“A dead end?”

Milo narrowed his eyes and began peering around the dark shadows of the back street, when...

“Raargh!”

The child suddenly leaped down on him from above, smacking him on the head with a wooden pole. Milo reeled, crouching down and clutching his head in pain.

“Owww...!”

“...! You’re...a woman?!”

The young child faltered, and Milo took advantage of the opening by reaching out and grabbing them by the arm.

“Nobody hits a lady and gets away with it,” he scowled, drawing his face closer, before pulling down his hood and breaking into a smile. “So it’s a good thing I’m a man, eh? Ah-ha-ha!”

He was a pretty young man, with cherubic features. His large indigo eyes were filled with kindness and wisdom, and he had pale-white skin and silky-soft sky-blue hair. He didn’t look much older than sixteen or seventeen, and with his lean build and gentle voice, it wasn’t surprising that the child mistook him for a woman. The only blemish on his beauty was a black mark around his left eye that gave him an unusual, almost comical appearance and earned him the nickname of Dr. Panda among the townspeople.

“You’ve been stung by a scorpion fly, haven’t you?” he said, lifting up the child’s bangs and revealing a blue swelling on their forehead. “I thought so. I caught a glimpse of it earlier. It looks like the stinger is still stuck in there. If the poison spreads, you could go blind. Come here a moment.”

“Hey, let go of me! What are you doing?” shouted the child, but Milo didn’t

take no for an answer. He pulled the child close, flicking the switch on his thermal scalpel and lightly slicing into the child's forehead, sending blood and pus dripping down it. Then he placed his lips over the wound and sucked out the scorpion fly's stinger. When that was done, he took a small block of jellyfish oil, melted it on the blade of his scalpel, and wiped the black salve over the affected area before swiftly winding a bandage around the child's head.

"There, all done!" he said, giving it a pat. "If it starts to swell again, come see me at my place. It's the Panda Clinic; you go all the way down this street and turn right, and it's next to the hardware store."

Although nowadays, cities like these had begun to show some signs of reviving the old times, it still wasn't uncommon for society to treat human lives as expendable and abandon those whose bodies had failed them. People with medical knowledge were highly valuable, and Milo was one of them, possessing excellent skills despite his young age.

"Mi-mister...," said the young child, clinging to Milo's pant leg and looking up at him with nervous diffidence. "Erm... H-here..." They held out the bag of steamed buns, but Milo pushed it back into their hands and patted the child on the head.

"The alligator buns are my favorite. You'll love 'em. Now, go on, get out of here!"

Milo sent them off, the child looking back over their shoulder several times before disappearing into the crowded street. Milo watched them leave, gave a satisfied sigh, pulled up his hood, and turned around.

To see a pair of big black eyes staring intently at him from the darkness.

Milo jumped and took a step back in surprise as a gentleman stepped out into the light, adjusting the brim of his fedora. There was about two meters of distance between them, but the man was so imposing that Milo felt as though he had appeared right under his nose.

"...Generally, I find philanthropy to be a meaningless gesture of self-satisfaction, akin to a fat man removing the pickles from his hamburger and tossing them to the dog," he said. "But you're different, Milo. You give away things that you need, to people you have no relation to. It's very admirable. A

beautiful flower in an ugly world. If this were a movie, I'd go so far as to call it cliché."

Surrounding him were several bodyguards, keeping a close eye on the corners of the alley. They wore masks of Immie, the city's mascot, and even in the eccentric downtown streets of Imihama, those broad-shouldered men looked very odd all plastered with the same cartoon smile.

The man waved his hand, and the bodyguards all took a step back.

"Ah, I suppose it's rather gauche of me to refer to my own city as an ugly world, isn't it?"

"Mr. Governor...!"

"There's no need to be so formal, Milo. Please, call me Kurokawa." Kurokawa strode toward Milo and tore back his hood. "My, your beauty astounds me every time I see it. Have you ever considered quitting the medical profession and becoming an actor? Just a thought. By the way, how is the new medicine-mixing machine working out for you?"

"Ah... Very well, thank you..." Milo looked uncomfortable as Kurokawa stared him down. "Sorry, but I have to go; my sister's waiting for me at the clinic..."

"Ah, but of course," said Kurokawa. "I wouldn't want to waste the time of the greatest doctor in all of Imihama. Nor would I dare overlook the importance of the health of the Vigilante Corps' leader, Pawoo Nekoyanagi."

He spoke in a low, unhurried voice, without ever breaking Milo's gaze, and his face was grim despite his frivolous tone.

"It does raise a question, however," he continued. "Which is the greater waste of time: sitting with me, eating peanuts and arguing over which comic book character would win in a fight, or working yourself to the bone trying to save a sister for whom nothing can be done?"

"...Gh!"

Kurokawa had crossed a line, and Milo glared into his pitch-black eyes with all the hatred in his soul. However, that anger was not even a drop in the sea of darkness that seemed to emanate from Kurokawa's very being.



“It’s time to give up on the nice-guy act, Doctor.”

Kurokawa gave his first smile, if such a twisting of the lips could be called that.

“Your behavior is admirable but ultimately futile. No matter how hard you toil to save them, people will die without money. The same goes for that child. You’re only prolonging their suffering!”

Kurokawa grabbed Milo by the lapels and looked the good doctor in the eye. Milo seemed about ready to burst into tears.

“Come work for me, Doctor! With your skills, we can tend to many more patients, rich ones from beyond the city walls! There’s money to be made, enough for all the medicine you could need! Then you could...” Kurokawa spotted the doubt in Milo’s tearstained eyes. “...You could save your sister...”

Suddenly, the sound of screams echoed from the direction of the cinema on the neon-lit street. Just as a huge crowd of guests came spilling out the doors, there was a great *Gaboom!* as an enormous mushroom split the building open, smashing the large neon sign in two.

“Mr. Governor!”

“What was that...?”

Kurokawa’s bodyguards immediately crowded around him, pushing Milo aside. Mushrooms burst through the rooftops of the fishmonger, the junk shop, the brothel, one after another, their multicolored caps scattering spores everywhere as people ran about screaming. From cap to cap, a human-shaped shadow flitted across the sky. When people saw it, they stared up in the air and pointed.

“Mushroom Keeper!” “There’s a Mushroom Keeper in the city!” “Don’t touch the spores; you’ll get the Rust!”

Voices cried out in confusion. In the blink of an eye, the main street had been reduced to chaos. Out of the crowd came a number of the muscle-bound rabbit-headed men who served as Kurokawa’s bodyguards. They were holding another of their number, who was covered head to toe in soot. This one had a noticeably lighter build, and from beneath the mask came a high-pitched voice.

“Hey! Let go of me! I can walk, I said! Eek! Where do you think you’re touching?!”

The stranger managed to fire off a barrage of verbal abuse before the bodyguards threw her on the floor before Kurokawa.

“Owww! Be a little gentler, would you?! ...Oh, Uncle Kurokawa! Ha-ha... My, you look dashing tonight; is that a new hat?”

Kurokawa’s face was devoid of emotion. He grabbed the rabbit head by the ears and tugged it off.

“Pwah!”

An explosion of braids fell about the girl’s face. The rest of her hair was cut short around her bangs and the back of her neck, resembling a pink jellyfish. She had a somewhat sly look about her, but her amber eyes were big and bright, like a cat’s, and from appearances alone, she seemed like a relatively sweet young lady.

“Erm, listen... It’s about that Akaboshi guy...,” she began, looking at Kurokawa with upturned eyes, though the pressure he emanated caused beads of sweat to drip down her slender neck. “You know how you told me to kill him? Well... He kinda got away...and then he *kinda* got into the city.”

“I can see that, you idiot. You had a warplane. How did you manage to mess up killing one man?”

“I—I got the old man he was with! I think... I mean, I shot him up pretty bad... Ack! Ack!”

Kurokawa motioned with his chin to a bodyguard, who produced a bottle of water. The pink-haired jellyfish girl downed it like her life depended on it.

“...Phew! But that Akaboshi dude, I tell you! You could have warned me about him more! You said he had a bow, not...whatever that thing was! It went straight through the Escargot Plane’s guts like...a bolt of lightning, or something!”

“...Hey, is that true? Akaboshi managed to bring down an Escargot Plane with a bow and arrow?” whispered a nearby bodyguard as Kurokawa stroked his

beard with great interest.

“It appears he’s attempting to flee north toward the bureau,” said a guard. “He won’t get far.”

“I don’t want the vigilantes beating us to the punch. Get there first and kill him.” As Kurokawa spoke, he suddenly paused to think, then continued. “...Split into two groups. Seventy percent of you search the area around the office. The other thirty percent, search the streets.”

“The... The streets?” asked one of them nervously, but a glare from Kurokawa shut him up, and he gave a hurried bow and scrambled onto the rooftop like an acrobat, before leaving in pursuit of the trail of mushrooms.

“Erm... Mr. Kurokawa, sir? What about my plane? It was kinda expensive, you know...”

“Of course, my dear. I shall add it to your life insurance payout.” Kurokawa took a pistol from his inside pocket and handed it to her. “For now, take this and join the others searching the streets. There are around twenty of them in total.”

“Huh? Whaaat?! You mean, like, fight Akaboshi myself? With this little thing?”

“Remember who pays your wages, my dear. Of course, if you don’t want to, I could always have you hanged for breach of contract, instead. Which would you prefer?”

“What a crook...!” muttered the jellyfish girl, biting her lip, before hyping herself up and sprinting out of the alley. Several rabbit-headed bodyguards followed after her, flooring pedestrians in their wake.

“I must speak with HR about their hiring process...,” said Kurokawa, shrugging. “Now then, where has my favorite child gotten to?”

But Milo had managed to slip free of Kurokawa and escape into the crowd of people unnoticed. Before leaving, he gave one last look back, only to quickly pull himself aside as Kurokawa’s laser-like gaze swept toward him. Then he ran all the way to the end of the street and disappeared around the right-hand corner.

“Shall we pursue him, Governor?” asked a bodyguard.

“Hmm, no, I think not,” said Kurokawa. “I was just having a little fun with him today. But I mean really, now. Look at all this...”

He turned around to stare at the wreckage of his favorite movie theater, its roof infested with mushrooms, and gave a throaty laugh.

“You’ve really gone and done it now, Akaboshi. I was looking forward to the *Star Wars* marathon tomorrow.”

“...Is that a sci-fi movie, sir?”

Kurokawa didn’t even glance at the bodyguard trying to cheer him up with small talk. “Well, no matter,” he said, adjusting his hat and walking away. “It seems I will be quite occupied with work for the foreseeable future.”

As you can see, a forest of mushrooms has sprung up in the Iron Desert, just ten kilometers from the west border. Acts of mushroom terrorism have been reported in Gifu, Tagakushi, and most recently, Gunma, since the start of June. Imihama authorities suspect that the crimes were committed by a single individual and have requested that Gunma share any information they have regarding the terrorist. However, Gunma Prefecture had already announced that the terrorist, one Bisco Akaboshi, had been killed at the southern border just a few days ago, and questions are being raised over whether this false information was released intentionally, and if so, who is to blame...?

In the dark room, the television cast a flickering pale glow onto the skin of the woman in the hospital bed. She was beauty and power combined, her long, elegant limbs still gently bulging with refined muscle, like a panther. Her face had begun to grow weary, but even so, a spine-tingling look of determination flared in her eyes.

However, her beauty was marred by the Rust that covered half her body, sticking to her skin like burned rice. From her left thigh, it crawled up her torso, over her chest and up, gently coiling around her neck and casting a cruel rust-colored shadow over her perfect features. From one look at her face, it was clear the disease was in its final stages.

Her eyelashes fluttered as she blinked and turned away from the television, disconnecting her IV. She rose out of her bed and stood up straight, letting her long black hair fall about her waist. Her bare footsteps echoed around the room as she walked over to a quarterstaff leaning against the wall and took it in her hands. It was a plain iron staff, little more than a hexagonal rod of metal, almost as tall as the woman herself and weighing over five kilograms. It was not a woman's weapon.

But she swung it with incredible agility, slicing through the air with enough

force to send the curtains flying. The very room began to creak and groan, though the staff had not so much as grazed it. Then she took a deep breath and swung again, and again. Ripping through the air, her hair scattered, as if in a furious dance, as the whole building quaked in fear, until she gave one final thrust, stopping barely two centimeters short of the TV monitor.

An emergency bulletin had appeared on the news. The reporter hurried out her words as images of the streets of Imihama infested with mushrooms flashed up on the screen, interspersed with blurry footage of the redheaded perpetrator as he fled across the rooftops.

“The Mushroom Keepers,” the woman said to herself, utterly unperturbed. “The scourge of the land. You’re just in time. Your plague hasn’t taken me yet. I can still fight...!” Her deep voice oozed with uncontrollable rage.

Popular opinion held that mushrooms were the source of the Rust, and so eradicating them along with the Mushroom Keepers who helped spread them was the primary mission of more or less every armed organization these days. And this woman, Pawoo Nekoyanagi, was the captain of one such organization, known as the Imihama Vigilante Corps.

“Pawoo! You turned out all the lights again!”

As Milo entered the room, the iron rod tore through the air once more, stopping millimeters from his nose. The force of the swing ruffled his sky-blue hair. While Milo stood there, frozen in terror, Pawoo dropped her staff and brought her face up close to his.

“You’re late, Milo.”

Then a sly smile appeared on her lips, and she placed her arms around him, pulling him tightly to her chest.

“Wait... Pawoo... Can’t...breathe...”

“Did some harlot string you along again? That’s why I told you to wear a hood this time.”

“No, that’s not it,” said Milo, somehow managing to free his head from her grip and casting a reproachful look. “I saw a child with a scorpion fly sting, so you know... But then a Mushroom Keeper showed up—on Karakusa Street! It

was amazing! There was suddenly this huge mushroom, and..."

"You shouldn't make your patient worry, Milo," she said, pulling him closer midsentence, before laughing sweetly as if her prior maturity was an act and adding, "Not to mention your big sister."

Pawoo Nekoyanagi, leader and strongest fighter of the Imihama Vigilante Corps, and her younger brother, Milo, the medical prodigy of the Panda Clinic. People said they were two pearls who had fallen down to Imihama from Heaven. When placed alongside each other, one could see the familial resemblance, but the two siblings had very different airs. The elder sister held the wrath of a demon, the younger brother the kindness of an angel, as though God had assigned each of them the opposite sex.

Milo felt his sister was acting differently today, and there was a strange pain in the pit of his stomach. So he allowed himself to be cradled by her, feeling her strong yet gentle arms around him. Occasionally, the soft touch of her skin was replaced with harsh, chafing metal that made Milo's heart ache.

Suddenly, an alarm sounded from the pocket of the uniform hanging on the wall, and a voice could be heard shouting over background noise.

"In pursuit of criminal fleeing eastbound toward the bureau area. Section two, squads three through eight, be on your guard. Repeat..."

Pawoo dropped her brother, marching over to the wall and snatching up her equipment.

"It's the Man-Eating Redcap. We've got him."

"Pawoo!"

Her outfit consisted of a full-body leather suit that covered her neck, a shawl made of ceramic fiber, with her Vigilante Corps uniform draped over the top. It was armor that would shrug off any stray blades or bullets without much difficulty. To top it all off, she wore a pair of steel greaves and swept her long hair back to equip a large visor-like skullcap that protected her forehead. In moments, she was Pawoo the warrior woman, pride of the Imihama Vigilantes.

"Pawoo, don't! You have to rest!" Milo pleaded, clinging to her. "The Rust is nearing your heart! What could be more important than your life?!"

“Yours, Milo. Lock the doors. Even if the Governor himself drops by, you’re to stay inside. Understood?”

“*You* have to stay inside, Pawoo! It’s too dangerous!”

Pawoo’s eyes widened for a second. Milo was never one to lose his temper or raise his voice to her, yet now he stood with fire in his eyes, blocking her escape.

“You *always* put your life on the line for me, without stopping to think how that makes me feel! Well, not this time! You’re going back to bed! *I’ll* talk to the Vigilante Corps!”

“...You’re not going to let me go? No matter what I say? No matter what happens?”

“When have *you* ever listened to what *I’ve* said, Pawoo? It’s my turn to be the stubborn one!”

“...I see. Thank you, Milo...”

Milo froze as Pawoo reached out and gently caressed his face. She looked at him with love and sadness in her eyes, and then...

Wham! She delivered a quick, sharp blow to the back of his neck, and Milo’s body crumpled. Catching him in her arms, she laid him on the bed.

Who’s going to protect you after I’m gone? Who will keep you safe from the Rust, from violence, from evil?

“I can’t die yet, Milo. I will fight with my last breath to stop this world sinking its fangs into you.”

For a while, she sat there, stroking the beautiful face of her sleeping brother, before the communicator in her pocket rang once more. Without even listening to it, Pawoo stood up and bolted out of the clinic and into the streets, her uniform billowing behind her.

“What kind of sister uses martial arts on her own brother?!”

It wasn’t long before Milo regained consciousness. As he looked upon the clinic’s open door, he gave a despondent sigh.

...No, today I've got to...!

Milo ran into the medicine room and locked it twice, before fishing around in his coat pocket. He took out several mushroom fragments, taken while everyone else was distracted by the terrorist on the streets. As he arranged the multicolored specimens on his desk, his eyes gleamed.

“I’ve never seen any of these species before! One of these must be the one...!”

Milo placed a well-worn leather bag on the table and undid its intricate lock. Inside was a crude-looking machine with three thick cylinders and a mess of wires. Milo turned on the heat and added the mushroom fragments along with some solution to the cylinders. Then, with trembling fingers, he began to stir.

Just as Kurokawa had alluded, the government offered a medicine that could stave off the Rust. However, it was expensive and needed to be taken regularly. It wasn’t the sort of thing any old town doctor like Milo could normally afford.

But Milo was a special case. He was working to reverse-engineer the medicine—an act of the highest treason, not to mention next to impossible without an incredibly advanced knowledge of pharmaceuticals. Only Milo, the genius doctor of the Panda Clinic, could hope to unravel its secrets.

He had tried every kind of ingredient imaginable in his efforts to save the life of his beloved sister. And he was convinced now that the secret lay in these mushrooms. The scourge of the land and source of the Rust, according to the common man.

“...Okay. Here we go. How about this...?”

Within the tube bubbled a viscous green fluid. Milo poured some onto the back of his hand and gave it a sniff, nodding happily.

Phew. Let's let some air in.

It was a hot and humid July evening. Wiping some sweat off his forehead with his sleeve, Milo got up and turned to the window.

...It's open...?

Wind blew through the already open window, caressing his sky-blue hair and

shaking the curtains. A pale shaft of light illuminated the floorboards. Milo suddenly started to feel apprehensive and silently cast a glance over his shoulder.

“.....”

Suddenly, he froze, overwhelmed by an incomprehensible fear.

...There's someone there...!

Two emerald lights stared back at him from the shadows in curious bloodlust, like a predator eyeing its next meal. Milo was unable to move at all or even look away.

“...”

...

“...Clamshell mushrooms are no good in medicine. It's better to eat them.”

“...Ah...!”

“Can you make medicine?” said the voice as its bearer strode out of the shadows and into the evening light. A gust from the window fluttered his scarlet hair, and Milo found himself still unable to move a muscle. The man was like a wild beast. “Well?”

“...Huh? What?”

“This here's a lurkershroom. It's the strongest mushroom I have. Can you make something out of it?”

The redheaded man produced a purple mushroom and shoved it at Milo.

“You must be a great doctor. Out of the three people I threatened, all three recommended I come here.”

“...I—I can't!” Milo protested. “Making unauthorized medicines is against the law!”

“But you were just doing it, weren't you?” the man replied.

“Ah, um...!”

“Sorry, but I don't have time for this. Next time you talk back, I'm gonna kill

you.”

The man’s rough voice was tinged with bitterness. It was enough to make Milo quake in his boots... Then he suddenly smelled something else, coming from the man’s back.

“That smells like a Salmo corrosive round... Did you get shot by an Escargot Plane? That’s bad; you can’t just bandage that up...!”

“What...?”

“You need more than medicine to deal with that!” Milo cried. His fear quickly crumbled as his doctor side took over. “If the bullet’s not removed, the corrosion won’t stop. Medicine alone won’t be enough. You need to let me operate at once!”

“Didn’t I say I’d kill you if you talked back to me again?”

“Then kill me. But if he doesn’t get treatment, that elderly gentleman will die!”

The redheaded man seemed taken aback by Milo’s sudden fervor. He certainly couldn’t have been expecting that, even in the unlit room, Milo could tell that the man’s companion was old; and just from the smell of the gunpowder, he even knew what kind of bullet he had been shot with. He thought for a second, stroking his chin, before replying.

“Okay. Understood. But make the medicine first. How long does it take?”

“It depends, but usually at least twenty minutes,” said Milo, sitting down at his desk.

“They’ll be here in ten,” said the red-haired man as he headed to the window and cast a furtive glance outside. “...I tried to create a diversion near the tower, but they’re strangely organized. I thought these guys were vigilantes.”

Suddenly, a bullet pierced the window and embedded itself in the door. The red-haired man ran back to the old man, picked him up, and dived behind Milo’s desk, just before a storm of bullets tore through the wall.

Milo began to shout, but the red-haired man placed his finger to his lips, and Milo suddenly clasped his own mouth shut and nodded frantically. Apparently

seeing some humor in this, the red-haired man gave a tough-looking grin, and the glint of his dazzling canines was burned forever into Milo's mind.

"Bisco Akaboshi! You are wanted on twenty-six counts of mushroom terrorism! We've been ordered to kill you if you resist, so why don't you come on out with your hands up?"

A voice sounded over a megaphone, to which Bisco yelled back, "You idiots, I got a hostage here! Be careful!" He gave Milo a wink, before continuing. "You fire one more shot, and this panda-lookin' asshole is gonna get his throat ripped out!"

Even if it was a bluff, Milo felt a chill run down his spine. Two seconds, three. As there was still no reply, Bisco sidled to the window and took a peek outside. As he did, another hail of lead shot out the window entirely and filled the medicine room with holes. Milo let out a scream as Bisco grabbed him along with the old man and kicked down the locked door, diving into the waiting room beyond.

"Those bastards didn't even hesitate. Woulda thought a doctor like you would have more friends."

"I... I can't believe it...," said the dejected Milo as he cradled the mixing machine in his arms. Even now, he refused to part with it.

"They'll be startin' their raid soon," said Bisco. "Sorry, but I'm gonna have to blow up your clinic."

"Okay... Wait, what?! Wh-wh-what did you say...?"

"Hold on to the old man for me."

Bisco dropped the unconscious old man toward Milo as he sat slumped on the floor. As Milo fumbled to catch him, Bisco drew his bow and nocked a rust-colored arrow. He fired a shot into the room they just left, followed by a second, and a third, into every corner of the clinic. Where he shot, there soon began to grow bunches of little red things, breaking through the walls, ceiling, and supports.

"Okay. Time to get outta here."

“Wait!” said Milo. “I have a wheelchair; we can get this gentleman into it, and...”

“Too late. *It’s starting.*”

“What is...?”

“Chaaarge!”

The door suddenly flew off its hinges, and a group of masked men with heavy weaponry surged into the room. As Milo looked on in shock, Bisco grabbed him and dived through a nearby window. Then, not a moment later, there was an enormous rumble from inside.

A great big red mushroom extended through the roof and up into the sky, blasting the building to pieces. As its cap unfurled, it rained down debris on the ground below. The bunny-faced men were swept up by the force of the swelling mushroom and tossed into the air, screaming.

“A... A mushroom...!”

Milo watched the scene before his eyes, enraptured, as Bisco carried him across the rooftops. Out of nowhere, there was now a bright-red mushroom towering over the city, still reaching up and up toward the sky. In this city, where the citizens cowered from the wind behind huge walls, never before had he seen something so brimming with life and vigor.

It’s beautiful, Milo thought, struck with wonder, before he noticed the nameplate that read PANDA CLINIC gently spiraling as it fell back down to earth and was lost in the rubble. Then his face grew stiff.

“Ah... AAAAGHHH!”

“What is it? Keep it down back there.”

“My... My cliniic!”

“Yeah?”

“It’s gone!”

“I mean, I did tell you earlier,” said Bisco, not showing an ounce of guilt. Milo kicked and squirmed under his arm, and he stopped and set him down on the

rooftop. “Sorry, but I didn’t have a choice. If I hadn’ta done that, they’d have killed the both of us.”

Milo couldn’t even respond to Bisco’s brazen remark and continued to throw a tantrum, when Bisco suddenly dropped down flat to the rooftop as a helicopter searchlight narrowly passed by where the two were standing.

“Stay still,” he said, and Milo nodded in fear, very quickly shutting up. Without standing, Bisco took several arrows in his mouth and, aiming to the east, launched them one by one over to a far corner of the city. The arrows drew a large arc through the air before embedding themselves in a tall building and exploding with a *Gaboom! Gaboom!* into large red mushrooms. Then he watched as the helicopters swarming the sky spotted the decoy and drifted off into the distance.

“That won’t fool them for long. Let’s move,” said Bisco, grabbing Milo and the old man and dropping down to the streets below. Then he lifted up a manhole cover and dropped Milo in before following, the old man under his arm.

“That was close,” muttered Bisco as a storm of footsteps echoed over the manhole cover above. “This sucks. Looks like they’ve sent some kind of elite force...”

There was a sort of musty stench about the sewer, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as Bisco expected, and there were several fluorescent lights on the walls for him to find his way. The doctor had been pretty quiet for a while now, and so Bisco quickly descended the ladder to see how he was doing.

...

A few paces away from him, he stopped and squinted. Milo’s cloak and lab coat were spread out on the floor, and the old man lay undressed atop them. At his side, with knitted brows, Milo was examining his body and taking his pulse. His demeanor was a far cry from the scared little boy who was cowering in Bisco’s arms not a moment ago.

“How is he?”

“Six shots... Two of these should have been enough to kill him,” said Milo in an agitated tone, unable to turn away from the man. “Who is he? His pulse and

breathing are all normal...!”

“So he’ll live?”

“That depends on this,” he said, removing a vial from the mixing machine he had been guarding so diligently and holding it up to the light. It was now filled with a strange purple liquid. “I’ll have to operate to remove the bullets and corrosion. Afterward...I’ll inject him with this, and then it’s all up to him.”

Bisco listened to Milo speak, then gave a satisfied nod and stood up. Milo jumped up after him.

“W-wait! Where are you going?”

“We can’t stay here long; they’ll find us. I’m gonna go lead ’em around for a while. I leave the old man in your hands.”

“No, don’t!” Milo yelled.

Bisco stopped and turned around. Even he was surprised by the force behind the gentle-looking boy’s voice. Milo scrutinized his face and neck before reaching his slender arms underneath Bisco’s cloak.

“Hey, hey, hey! Hands to yourself, asshole!”

“You’re not going anywhere with these wounds! Are you planning to die out there?! Sit down, right now! I’ll take care of you.”

“I’m not the one who needs taking care of, genius! Look after the old man—Hey, get your hands off me!”

“Yes, you are! Look at all this blood! I can’t possibly leave you like this!”

Then there was the briefest of struggles, at the conclusion of which Milo was left gasping for breath, glaring into Bisco’s eyes with all the determination he could muster.

“Then at least let me stitch up your face! There’s blood getting into your eyes! You’ll never survive out there like that!”

Bisco faltered, unable to respond to Milo’s insistence. The doctor sat him down, took a medical kit from his pocket, and examined Bisco’s face once more. While Bisco himself seemed unperturbed, his face was covered in cuts and

scratches, and blood dripped down from a gash on his forehead and into his left eye. Milo wielded his scalpel and cut into the scabs, drawing out the blood, before sewing shut the large wound on Bisco's brow. He applied some ointment, but when he tried to bandage him up, Bisco resisted so hard, like an unruly dog at the vet, that Milo gave up. Still, satisfied with his level of treatment, Milo wiped his sweat and smiled.

"There! All done!"

"..."

"...Erm, sorry, did it hurt?"

"What's your name?" Bisco asked.

"Oh, Nekoyanagi. Milo Nekoyanagi," he replied.

"Milo. Well, erm..."

Bisco stared into the round blue eyes that looked back at him curiously, searching for the right words, before...

"Thanks." After managing to spit out that single word, he quickly got to his feet and placed a foot on the ladder leading out.

"Wait!"

"What is it now?!"

"I don't know the patient's name...", said Milo, apparently having completely forgotten the threat of the boy standing before him. "Or yours, for that matter..."

"The guy about to croak is Jabi, and I'm..."

"..."

"Bisco. Bisco Akaboshi."

From the top of the ladder, Bisco looked back at Milo one last time. Their eyes locked, emerald and sapphire each mysteriously drawn to the other. Eventually, Bisco turned away and, lifting up the manhole cover, disappeared into the night.

"...Bisco Akaboshi..."

The boy's name danced on Milo's lips as Bisco's crimson storm blew across the land. For a while, Milo simply gazed at the light's reflection on the surface of the water, before snapping back to his senses and rushing over to Jabi's side.

“Captain! Captaaaain!”

A scout ran up to the entrance of the prefectural bureau, out of breath. Pawoo was standing there with the rest of the building’s security, arms crossed and grim-faced at the current impasse. She gave an order to the deputy by her side before approaching the young vigilante.

“The footprints leading to the bureau were a bluff! Akaboshi is currently near the west gate! It’s like he’s lost his mind, ma’am!”

“What happened? What did you see? Somebody get this man some water!”

“I saw some guys with rabbit masks take him on, Kurokawa’s men. They outnumbered him, but they still didn’t stand a chance!”

Governor. Why are you getting involved...?

Pawoo clicked her tongue. As the other members tended to the scout, he continued.

“Ma’am. You need to hear this. I suggest you sit down.”

“What...?”

“I saw a huge mushroom go off in the shopping district,” he said. His teeth were chattering with fear, but he pressed on. “It was at the Panda Clinic! Where your brother...”

Pawoo’s blood surged, and her face became a visage of wrath. She clenched her jaw and pushed the man aside. When the deputy saw her striding off, he chased after her.

“Captain!”

“Lower the threat level for this area. Send squads two, three, and four to the west gate and squad nine to the north.”

“Are you going ahead on your own?! We’re dealing with Japan’s most wanted criminal here!”

“I don’t recall asking for your opinion,” Pawoo seethed as she hopped astride her huge motorcycle. “You can try telling me what to do once you can land a single hit on me in training. Until then, follow my orders and don’t mess this up. Understood?”

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

Pawoo sped off on her white motorcycle at top speed without waiting to hear the deputy’s reply. Then she swung her metal staff, striking the ground with such force it launched her vehicle up into the air and onto the rooftops.

Milo...!

Pawoo grew impatient as she sped toward the towering mushroom, her bike a silver streak across the nightscape of Imihama.

From atop the roof, he surveyed the city. The majestic mushrooms stood tall and cast their faint glow on the streets below. The spores fell like powdered snow, gently brushing past Bisco’s cheeks. Following a fierce battle, the rabbit-headed guards had retreated en masse, leaving the bodies of their fallen comrades where they lay. Now, in the center of that bustling city, there was only an eerie silence.

I’m worried about Jabi. Gotta get back to the sewers. But where are the Vigilante Corps?

Bisco pondered his next move carefully, before sniffing and looking down at his feet, where a particularly petite rabbit-headed guard had been trying to crawl away for some time. With a thud, he brought his foot down on their back.

“Gyaaah!” came a high-pitched voice. Bisco grabbed the ears and pulled with all his might, arching the person’s back until the mask came off with a pop, and a flurry of pink braids flopped around the person’s shoulders. It was a woman with pink hair reminiscent of a jellyfish.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold it, hold it, hold it! I...was against the whole thing—honest! Such a...kind and gentle man can’t *possibly* be our enemy, right? It was just, you know, the governor! He forced me to do it!”

The young girl looked up at Bisco meekly. Her smile twitched, and she was sweating bullets.

“Tell me. Who are you guys? Is this all of you? What about the Vigilante Corps?”

“Y-you wouldn’t kill a poor, sweet, innocent young girl like me, would you? Listen, I-let’s make a deal! I’ll quit the force, leave it all behind. I’ll join your side, just...”

“You hard of hearing or somethin’? Maybe it’ll help if I crack your skull open, huh?”

“Nooo! Please don’t! Not my skull! I need that to live!”

Suddenly, Bisco heard the faint buzz of an engine in the night. Straining his ears, he thought he could hear it coming from the direction of the shopping district and growing louder. Something was jumping over the rooftops, coming straight toward him.

A motorcycle...?

As soon as he was distracted, the jellyfish girl scurried away like a rat. Bisco started to go after her, when suddenly the sound of tires scraping on roof tiles grew much louder, and a huge motorcycle reared up into the dim light across the street. Leaping over the gap, it launched straight toward Bisco. No sooner had he realized a fight was coming than an iron rod came flying down toward him, smashing into the tiles.

Bisco leaped back at the very last second and avoided the fatal blow, but the shards of roof tile flew past him, nicking his cheek and drawing blood. Through the dust and rubble, Bisco spotted a glimmering crown of silver, and the woman’s murderous gaze fell upon him. Her curvaceous figure was entirely at odds with the way she swung her heavy iron staff, and she swiveled her motorcycle around to charge at Bisco again. He leaped back from her reckless charge, drawing his bow and loosing an arrow in one smooth motion. The arrow was dead-on, but suddenly her staff ripped through the air, and the arrow was gone. One swing, and she had knocked it out of the sky midflight. Bisco followed up with a second, and a third, but the woman deflected them all in a whirlwind of steel, leaving her without so much as a scratch.



She's good...!

Seeing her strength and resolve, Bisco switched tactics, aiming his bow at the rooftop in front of him. As the motorcycle bore down on him, about to run him over, he fired his arrow, and a huge mushroom exploded with a *Gaboom!* out of the roof tiles, blasting the woman and her vehicle high into the air.

“...Grh!”

“Watch where you’re driving, lady! You should have your license revoked!” taunted Bisco with a smile. But his face went stiff when he saw her kick off the free-falling motorcycle to recover in midair and shoot toward Bisco with frightening speed. She spun her body like a whirlwind, her iron staff slicing the air like a knife as it drove into Bisco’s side.

“Kraaaaargh!” she shouted. Bisco blocked the blow with his bow, but the sheer force sent him flying across the street and into the side of a building, leaving a large hole. There was a loud crash and a cloud of dust. The woman frowned, watching the crash site carefully for any signs of movement, and spun her staff around.

That blow should have destroyed him. Bisco Akaboshi...is that all you’ve got?

The woman looked somewhat disappointed...until her eyes went wide as something glinted in the neon light. She moved her staff to block, and there was a loud clang of metal piercing metal. A black arrowhead poked out of her hexagonal iron staff, stopping only a half dozen centimeters short of her eyes.

This draw strength... It's not human...!

The warrior woman clenched her teeth as beads of sweat appeared on her forehead. Bisco sprang up, breaking through the thin roof of the building and landing before her.

“What was that? You’re pretty strong,” he said with a grin. “Where did you pick up those moves? They teach brides-to-be how to swing a staff in Imihama?”

The speed and power of Bisco’s shots were like bullets. No ordinary person could block them like she did. Especially not a woman.

“I am Pawoo Nekoyanagi, captain of the Imihama Vigilante Corps,” she shot back in a gruff voice, her anger plain to hear. “Surrender and await your sentence, Mushroom Keeper, or I’ll split your head in two.”

With her coat billowing behind her, Pawoo looked as majestic as a Valkyrie of Western myth. However, Bisco could plainly see the anger in her eyes. His curiosity piqued, he flashed her a glinting smile.

“Shouldn’t you have said that before you hit me?” he asked. “You look like you want me to die either way. What’d I do, kill your parents?”

“I warned you!”

Pawoo’s staff smashed into the ground beneath Bisco. Her hair was launched backward as she moved, revealing the Rust eating away at her beautiful face. As Bisco dodged her attack, he thought:

Damn, that Rust looks bad. I’m surprised she’s got moves like this when she’s about to kick the bucket.

He leaped across the rooftops, evading swing after swing, before arriving at Pawoo’s grounded motorcycle. With impossible strength, he lifted the bike above his head and swung it around like a baseball bat.

“Ryaargh!”

The bike protected Bisco from Pawoo’s descending staff. Moving it like a greatshield, he deflected her blows one after the other, until the vehicle was full of dents, and a plume of fire erupted from the engine.

“Kraaaaargh!” With a yell, Pawoo delivered a fearsome downward swing that cleaved her beloved vehicle in two. Yet in this life-or-death situation, Bisco’s wit was quicker than ever. He threw the flaming engine toward Pawoo, pulled out his bow, and fired. The explosion shredded the air between them. Bisco was launched violently back toward the roof of a gaming hall, into the large signage depicting a mascot shaped like a bowling pin, which collapsed in a cloud of dust.

Pawoo drove her staff into the ground like a stake, tearing a furrow into the roof, glaring at Bisco, who stood defiantly opposite her.

Even the lightest of hits from her staff could break bones. Pawoo had never

seen someone take this much punishment from it and live. Her hateful eyes were tinged with bewilderment.

“That’s some real bad Rust ya got there. I wouldn’t move around so much, or it’ll hasten the spread.”

“You shameless crook! How many cities have been crippled with Rust in your wake?”

“I’m getting tired of saying it, but mushrooms don’t spread the Rust. They feed on it. They’re the only way to get rid of it.” Bisco spat out a broken tooth, covered in saliva and blood, and turned to face Pawoo. “I’ve been traveling to wherever the Rust is the thickest, trying to cure it, and look at the thanks I get.”

Even as Bisco fought for his life, he spoke plainly, almost frivolously, with a smile. Pawoo looked a little taken aback as she responded.

“You think I’d believe a story like that?! Those mushrooms are nothing more than revenge! Your only purpose is to destroy as much as you can!”

“You’re wrong. I’m looking for the Rust-Eater.” Bisco looked Pawoo dead in the eyes and spoke calmly.

“The Rust-Eater...?”

Pawoo’s eyes faltered. Her opponent was wide open, and yet she couldn’t stop looking at his eyes. They burned, not with hate or malice, but with a fierce determination that forced her to stay her weapon.

“It’s a mushroom. One that can suck the Rust out of anything, man or machine. I’ve been searching for it this whole time... To save someone close to me. Drop your weapon and let me through; I’ve got no beef with the people here.”

“What rot. You think you can trick me? Draw your bow, Akaboshi, and let me strike you down where you stand!”

...Why is he so calm...? Is he trying to unnerve me? ...No matter. With my next attack, I’ll end this!

Seeing her indecision, Bisco grinned. As she raised her staff against him, he took the moment to hit her with a sly remark.

“Well, I suppose I didn’t come here for nothin’. I did meet that doctor here. What a help he was,” he said, watching Pawoo’s face. “...Dr. Nekoyanagi, was it? He looks a lot like you. You know him?”

“You mean...Milo...?” Pawoo’s glare shattered as though a curse had been lifted. Suddenly looking very uneasy, her blue eyes quivered. “You... You bastard, what have you done to him?!”

“What have I done?” Bisco repeated, flashing a toothy grin. “What do you think I’ve done? You know what they call me, don’t you?”

Before Bisco even finished, Pawoo was racing toward him with fury in her eyes. Wrath incarnate, she raised up her staff and brought it down on Bisco’s head...

But Bisco didn’t so much as flinch. The iron rod only made it partway through his flesh before coming to a halt.

“Grh?!”

“You idiot.”

Something white and round, like an airbag, sprouted from the staff where it connected with Bisco, cushioning the blow. Then dozens more appeared all along the length of the staff, from the tip to the handle, growing out of the metal itself. Round mushrooms, their beautiful white skin glistening.

He infected my staff...!

The arrow she blocked head-on had been coated in poison. With each swing of her staff, the balloonsrooms within it spread their roots. Bisco was fighting defensively and throwing taunts because he was stalling for time, waiting for the seed he planted to grow.

While Pawoo was distracted, Bisco made his counterattack. He slid right up to her and plunged a kick into her gut, launching her high into the air.

“You can tell when they’ve sprouted by the white mycelium that appears along the surface of the metal,” said Bisco, grinning and drawing his bow to the limit. “If you hadn’t been distracted, maybe you would have won this one.”

“Akaboshiiii!”

“It’s time for you to retire and get married,” he said. “It’s hard for me to hit such a pretty face.”

There was no way Pawoo could dodge Bisco’s shot now. She watched helplessly as the infected arrow lodged itself in her rusted shoulder, and the pain all but blanked out her mind.

Milo...! Spare him, please...! Please don’t take him...!

Pawoo gently closed her eyes and fell to the ground. Bisco hopped across the rooftop to catch her in his arms, before landing slightly off-balance.

“Man, she’s not as light as she looks.”

Holding Pawoo over his shoulder, Bisco dropped down into the backstreets and was about to set off running, when he saw her long, silky hair dragging against the ground. Unable to bear such a sad sight, he adjusted Pawoo’s body so he was carrying her hair carefully in his arms, before taking off like Hermes himself through the dark alleys of the city.

“Don’t move.”

Feeling a chill at the back of his neck, Bisco froze.

“Drop the hostage and put your hands up.”

Someone was pointing a gun at him. Bisco could sense their skill from where he stood, and his face stiffened. Having bought enough time from his fight with Pawoo, Bisco was running through the labyrinthine streets of Imihama, making his way back to the sewer where he left Jabi before the rest of the Vigilante Corps showed up.

He had taken Pawoo’s sleeping body to use as a bargaining chip, but somehow, he could tell that such cheap tactics weren’t going to work for him here. He did as the voice asked, dropping her body to the ground and raising his hands in the air... Then he sprang, swiftly drawing his lizard-claw knife and spinning toward the figure’s throat in a flash of steel. But the fatal blow was blocked...by another identical blade. When Bisco saw the pair of beady eyes beneath his foe’s disguise, he had to keep himself from crying out.

“...Unh... Ah...!”

“Hyo-ho-ho! Is there no mercy in your heart for a recently recovered old man?” said the figure, tearing back his disguise and smiling.

“Jabi!” shouted Bisco. His mouth flapped open and closed as he tried to decide what to say to his master first. “Sh...should you be up already? How are your wounds?”

“Well, see for yourself, my boy. Six bullets they got me with.”

As he said this, he rolled up his shirt, revealing the stitches on his belly.

“You old fart! You really had me goin’ there. I thought you were gonna die!”

“Well, so did I! That panda kid just about saved my life, I tell ya. But don’t go

givin' him *all* the credit, hmm? These ol' bones can take quite a beating, don'cha think?"

"You senile old coot... You were talking about what to do after you died... I thought..."

Bisco's fierce look fell apart as he struggled to fight back tears. Then, at last, Milo appeared, having been slow to keep up with the energetic old man as the latter sprang across the rooftops like a monkey. When he saw Bisco's face, he stopped in his tracks. The fierce terrorist, the Man-Eating Redcap, looked like nothing more than a sweet young child crying for his grandpa. Milo couldn't help but smile fondly at the sight.

"...Milo. You did this?"

"Oh, no! I just did what I could! It was your medicine that saved him, Mr. Akaboshi!"

"A Mushroom Keeper always repays his debts. Whatever you want, if it's within my power..."

"Oh, no, please! I couldn't possibly...!" protested Milo, averting his gaze, when his eyes fell upon the collapsed woman on the floor at Bisco's side.

"...Ah! Pawoo!"

"So you two do know each other. Figures," said Bisco, lifting the woman up and leaning her against the wall. "Don't worry; she's just asleep. She's a rowdy one, so I gave her some sleeping powder."

"She's my sister," said Milo. "Wait, sleeping powder? Mr. Akaboshi, don't tell me you actually beat her?! In a fight?!"

"Her Rust is still treatable. Give her the same medicine you gave Jabi."

Before he could finish, Jabi sauntered up to the sleeping woman and injected the rest of the medicine into her arm. Pawoo gave a slight frown as the purple liquid flowed into her body near the top of her shoulder, and soon her breathing became slow and peaceful.

"A...amazing...!"

Milo was astonished at the efficacy of the Mushroom Keeper's medicine, the

likes of which even his best efforts had never matched. His sister had always slept restlessly, but seeing her sleeping face now, he was overcome with newfound courage.

“Bisco, my boy, now’s not the time to play catch-up. The vigilantes’ iguana cavalry will be here in two shakes. We might not be lucky enough to escape next time.”

“Got it. We’re close to the north gate. Let’s hustle.”

“Yup, I’ll hold ‘em off, so you skedaddle now!”

“Right, we’ll... What?!” Bisco began to run, before stopping at his master’s unexpected reply. “Whaddaya mean, skedaddle?! *You’re* the one we need, remember?!”

“Think for a second, laddie. I’m just a poor old man who’s had six bullets taken out of him. I’m in no condition to hit the road just yet.”

“You’re the one who needs to think, Gramps! How are we supposed to make the medicine without you? What good is finding the Rust-Eater when *you’re* the only one who knows what to do with it?!”

Jabi stroked his white beard and shot a playful glance toward Bisco’s side. Bisco followed his master’s eyes to where the baby-faced doctor stood, petrified with fear. When he noticed Bisco staring at him, he gulped but didn’t break his gaze.

“Have you finally lost it, you old coot?!” said Bisco.

“Mr. Akaboshi! Take me with you! Please!” At Milo’s insistence, Bisco couldn’t even summon the strength to shake him off. He simply protested in shock.

“Let... Let go of me, kid! What’s that crazy old man been saying to you?”

“He told me about the Rust-Eater! I can help! I can make medicines and heal your wounds!”

“Get lost! You’re only gonna slow me down! I can’t keep babysitting you out in the wilderness, you know!”

“You just said I could ask you for anything I wanted!”

“I ain’t a genie, pal!” Bisco roared, bringing his full fury down on Milo. “The world outside those walls eats city slickers like you for breakfast! We ain’t just talking about losing one or two of those pasty arms of yours!”

“So what?!” Milo shouted back, summoning up all his courage and staring Bisco down. “We’re talking about the possibility of saving my sister, the only family I have left in the whole world! I’d gladly lose an arm for that! I’ll give up my life, too, if that’s what it takes!”

The pure, unadulterated passion in Milo’s voice ran a crack right through Bisco’s heart of stone. With his lips pursed in a line, he grabbed Milo by the collar and glared at him.

No one but Jabi had ever filled the role of Bisco’s companion before. He was like a wild horse that even the bravest of the Mushroom Keepers had failed to tame. And the boy before him was so weak it looked like one strong gust from the Rust Wind could blow him away. He couldn’t use a bow. He couldn’t ride a crab. He was nothing more than a city kid who would die if he took one step outside the walls.

But his eyes. His blue eyes, clear like water. Even now, they trembled. And yet...they sparkled with a flaming will that rivaled Bisco’s own, like a blazing star!

“Squads two and three, deploy! Circle around to the northern gate!”

“Bisco, my boy, it’s the vigilantes! Time’s a-wastin’; get outta here!”

Bisco took a long, deep breath and thought. Three seconds passed, and when he opened his eyes once more, the anger within them had turned to resolve. He was the Mushroom Keepers’ brightest star. He looked back at Milo, who had said all he had to say and now stared with unwavering eyes even as his body shook with fear.

“If you want to stay alive, then do as I say. To travel with a Mushroom Keeper is to hold their life in your hands. If one of us dies, so does the other.”

“Mr. Akaboshi!”

“And... Stop fucking calling me that! We’re partners now—equals. I’m Bisco, and you’re Milo. Got it?”

“Yes, Mr. Ak—” But at Bisco’s piercing glare, Milo stopped and corrected himself with a smile. “Yes, Bisco!”

“Hyo-ho-ho!” Jabi cackled from the rooftops. “I feel like I’m witnessing the birth of something magical! Now go; get moving!”

One after another, Jabi’s mushroom arrows blossomed, blocking the paths of the approaching iguana cavalry with a *Gaboom! Gaboom!* and once again throwing the night into turmoil. Bisco looked as if he wanted to say something to him, but he stopped himself and watched the old man bound away across the rooftops.

“Hey, kid. What about your sister? Just gonna leave her here on the floor?”

“It’s okay! The Vigilante Corps will take care of her, and I left the rest of your medicine with her as well! Ah, but...”

“You might never see her again, you know. This might be the last moment you have with her. You should make it count.”

Milo nodded and approached his sister, who was sound asleep. Then he removed the leather bracelet he wore on his wrist and slipped it onto hers.

“You’ve always looked out for me, Pawoo. You were my shield. Now I have to return the favor. I want to look out for you, and sacrifice myself for your sake. Just once; that’s okay, isn’t it?”

Milo brought his face close to hers and pressed their foreheads together, closing his eyes.

“I’m going to save you. I swear I will. Wait for me, Pawoo. My wonderful sister...”

After embracing her for a moment, he suddenly remembered himself and sprang to his feet. With agitation in his eyes, Milo’s new partner was checking his wristwatch and looking around restlessly.

“I-i-it’s okay, Bisco! I’m done, I’m done!”

But Bisco had already grabbed Milo by the arm and was dragging him off in the direction of the towering north gate.

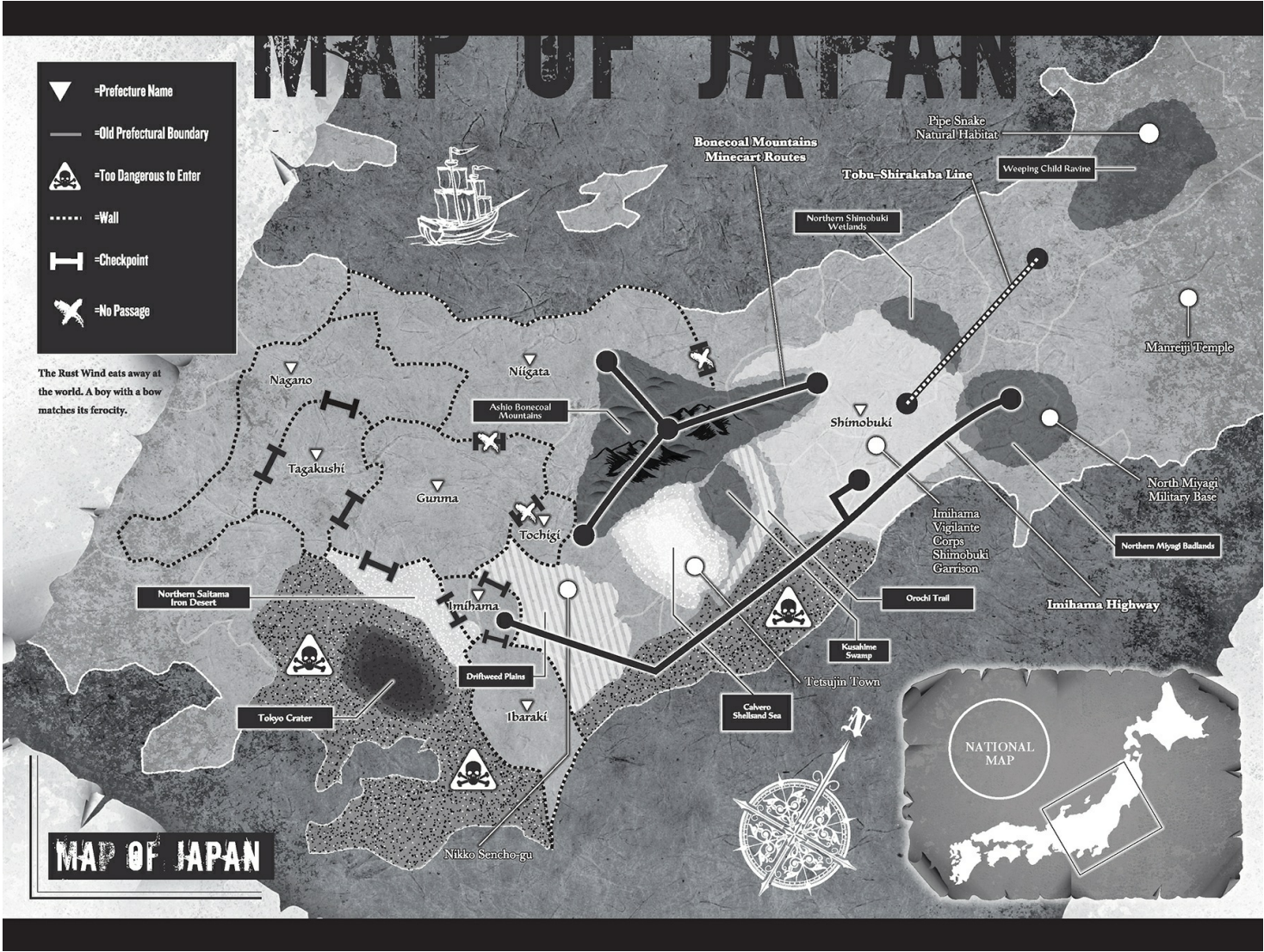
“You’re so goddamn slow! You want us to get killed before we even start?!”

Suddenly, he turned his head back and asked, “Your name, Milo. Is that supposed to be, like, that chocolatey stuff you put in milk?”

“Yeah! Milo helps kids grow up big and strong! That’s what my mom always used to say...”

“Heh. Big and strong, huh?” Bisco nocked a purple arrow as he ran, firing it just before the wall. The mycelium spread across the ground instantly, turning the earth a deep violet. “...Not a bad name, if you ask me.”

Wrapping his arms around Milo’s body, Bisco leaped onto the area his arrow had struck, and with a *Gaboom!* the enormous King Trumpet blossomed beneath his feet, catapulting him and Milo through the air and over the Imihama walls to lands unknown.



As the sun peeked between majestic cumulonimbus clouds in the azure sky, a refreshing breeze blew across the parched land. These were the Driftweed Plains of Tochigi. This plateau lay to the north of Imihama. The driftweed from which the area derived its name was a kind of algae that floated through the air and flourished in the spring and summer months. At night, it used energy gathered from the sun to emit a gentle bioluminescence that was quite remarkable to see and brought comfort to many weary travelers' hearts. Unfortunately, such sublime pleasures were of no interest to the likes of a certain roughneck outlaw.

"Thank goodness. It looks like they've left us alone," said Milo.

"Then gimme some space! What are you, a starfish? God damn, it's hot enough out here as it is...!" replied Bisco, mopping his sweat with his sleeve. Not only having to contend with the oppressive summer sun beaming down on the fresh grass underfoot littered with the remains of rusted old cars and tanks, but also the warmth radiated by the hovering driftweed, Bisco was sweltering under the layers and layers of heavy clothing he was forced to wear.

"I estimate that, thanks to your medicine, Pawoo has approximately three months to live. However, Jabi's case is considerably worse. Even if he stays within the walls, I'd say he's looking at another month at most."

Bisco shot a glance back at Milo that made him start with fright, then nodded for him to continue.

"If, as Jabi said," he went on, "the Rust-Eater exists somewhere in the unexplored regions of Akita, we won't make it in time on foot. Unfortunately, it's not possible to get there by car, either, and the Vigilante Corps will catch us immediately if we try to use the Imihama highway..."

"You think I don't know that? You really think I'd come out here without a

plan? You think I'm an idiot, don't you?"

"...Which means you must have something in mind, right, Bisco?"

Bisco swore under his breath and took a folded-up map from a pouch on his belt. As Milo peeked over his shoulder, he pointed with a scratched finger.

"The Ashio Bonecoal Vein comes down just north of here. The longest minecart rail goes all the way to Yamagata. If we use it, the trip shouldn't take us longer than a couple days."

"The Ashio Bonecoal Vein..." Milo grew concerned. "You mean to take us through that place? Bisco, we can't! It's too dangerous!"

The Ashio Bonecoal Vein was Japan's largest source of bonecoal, a new type of fuel that appeared shortly after the Tokyo Disaster. Formed of tin, black coal, and other minerals that were altered by the Rust Wind, bonecoal found common use as a power source these days. There were many theories as to the origin of its name, including that its pale-white appearance was reminiscent of bone or that it grew out of the skeletal remains of Tetsujin after it was destroyed.

In the past, prefectures such as Tochigi, Niigata, and Fukushima fought bitterly over the rights to mine the rich veins, but as they dug deeper and deeper into the mountain, they encountered more and more mutated creatures, toxic gases, and explosions until they were forced to cancel all operations in the area and withdraw. Now it only stood as a natural powder keg riddled with holes and minecart tracks, waiting for one spark to blow the lid off the whole thing.

"I heard a swarm of ironrats can strip a man to the bone in ten seconds flat! I know you're strong, Bisco, but what can the two of us hope to do against that?!"

"Who said it was just gonna be us two?"

"Huh? Well, who else...?" Milo asked. Then he realized Bisco was not fully paying attention, instead peering around carefully at his surroundings. "Say, Bisco? What are you looking for?"

"Our third member. Ah, found him."

Bisco whistled with his fingers, and all of a sudden the ground before them erupted as a giant crab burst into the air and stood before the pair, blotting out the sun. Showing off his brilliant-orange shell, he raised his claws into the air in such a majestic display he seemed powerful enough to slice a car in two.

“W-waaah!” Milo jumped behind Bisco, who gave him a gentle nudge with his elbow.

“You idiot, he’s a friend.”

Bisco walked happily up to the giant crab and brushed the sand off his carapace. The crab did nothing and simply let himself be groomed. Seeing this, Milo began to relax, staring at the beast in amazement.

“Th-this crab is your friend, Bisco?”

“He’s my brother,” Bisco replied, leaping atop the creature’s back. He’s a steelcrab. Name’s Actagawa. I had him take the long way east around the city. He doesn’t like the heat, so I figured he might hide underground. Finally found him.”

As its name implied, the steelcrab was a species with an incredibly tough shell. Because of their hardness and agreeable nature, steelcrabs were once used as animals of warfare by vigilante outfits along the coastal regions, and Actagawa had apparently come from such a lineage. They had excellent mobility, able to traverse mountains, wetlands, and deserts even while loaded down with cannons and machine guns, and their tough hides and sharp claws made them fearsome in combat, too. At one point, they were thought to be invincible weapons of war. However, it was very rare to see them in use now, owing to a ridiculous story about an Okinawan crab brigade that, while en route to Kyushu, encountered a freak storm that drove hundreds of wheatshrimp to shore. Unable to resist the sight of their favorite food, the crabs all jumped into the sea, never to return.

“The creatures that live in the mines won’t attack an enemy their teeth and poisons don’t work on. With Actagawa, we can go anywhere, and he can carry way more than a dump truck. You’d better start getting used to him, ’cause he’s our secret weapon.”

Milo took another look at the crab, and although his left claw looked

particularly menacing, he couldn't help but find his somewhat drowsy face and the way he idly picked at the ground rather endearing. He timidly approached and accepted the arm Bisco was offering, whereupon Bisco pulled him up and into the saddle on his right.

"Wow! Ohhh my goodness!"

From atop the crab's back, Milo could see far out across the sea of lush green driftweed. The wondrous view so delighted him he completely forgot his own fear, and he leaned forward to peer down at Actagawa face.

"My name's Milo Nekoyanagi! Pleased to meet you, Acta—"

But before he could finish his introduction, the crab extended one claw and, grabbing Milo by the scruff of his neck, launched him with an almighty throw far off into the distance.

"Waaaghhh!" screamed Milo as he arced through the sky.

"Aaagh! Actagawa?! What the hell are you doing?!" Bisco descended from his mount and ran toward the spot where Milo fell. He found him lying in a pile of thick grass and driftweed, and while he appeared physically unharmed, it was clear from his blubbering the amount of mental damage he had taken.

"...He hates me."

"...Kch. Kah-ha-ha-ha!"

Bisco couldn't help but burst into laughter at the sound of his partner's sulky voice. When Milo shot back a menacing glare, Bisco quickly cleared his throat and said, "Don't get your undies in a twist. He'd do the same if anyone he didn't know tried to climb on his back. He's got his own sense of pride to contend with. You're both just gonna have to get used to each other; that's all."

"So it's about which will give out first, his pride or my neck; is that it?"

"You sure do talk back a lot for a panda..."

Bisco folded his arms and appeared to think for a moment, before Actagawa strolled leisurely over to his side. Bisco looked back and forth between the luggage on his back and Milo's lab coat and gave a single nod.

"In any case, we can't cut through the mines if Actagawa won't let you ride

him. All right. First things first, we've gotta do something about your appearance. Actagawa never did like doctors..."

Bisco gave Milo a pair of pants and a tunic made of starfish skin and soaked in mycelium—and a pair of viperskin boots. At the belt around his waist he wore a medicine pouch filled with vials of mushroom poison, two lizard-claw knives, and two pouches filled with various other tools. With a quiver stuck in the belt to act as a sheath for his sword, and a well-worn hideshroom cloak around his shoulders to protect his whole body from the Rust, Milo looked every bit the part of a full-fledged Mushroom Keeper. He seemed significantly more dashing in this outfit than in his old lab coat, and even Bisco was a little taken aback by how natural it looked on him.

In truth, Milo was a lot stronger than Bisco gave him credit for, mostly from having to deal with his sister all the time, and he was more than capable of riding the giant crab. Saying this, Milo beamed and hopped atop his back.

About three hours later...

"Whoaaaa! Stooooop!"

Milo shrieked for the however-manyth time as he was tossed through the air and landed in the driftweed. Bisco glanced over and shouted some friendly advice as he tended to a small fist-size pot over an open flame.

"If you tense up when turning corners, he can feel it, and he gets mad! You've got to trust him; don't try to force him!"

"I understand, but it's haaard!"

"Well, the rest will come with practice. It's okay; I believe in your neck bones! You can do it...probably."

Milo's face was covered in dirt and scratches from his many tumbles, and he was dripping with sweat. Still, he hauled his slender body up to Actagawa's saddle and took the reins once again.

I wish you'd come up here and show me how to do it, though!

Milo directed a nasty glare toward Bisco, who was apparently going for the hands-off approach to teaching and instead was occupied with some sort of

bonfire. Then he cast his eyes forward once more just in time to see a small figure with a large pack walking steadily down the road. Just as Actagawa was about to bear down on them, Milo seized the reins and shouted.

“Wah! A person! Actagawa, stop! Wh-whoa! Whoa there, I say!”

As Actagawa screeched to a halt, Milo was flung forward, narrowly avoiding being dashed against the hard stone road and, instead, landing softly in a patch of floating driftweed.

“Owww! Actagawa, y-you’re too fast!” said Milo, massaging his sore flank, when he suddenly remembered the figure he had seen and sprang to his feet. Or at least, he was about to, when he spotted a girl standing over him.

“Ah. Morning, sleepyhead,” she said. “Thought you were a goner for a sec there.”

“Oh, I do apologize!” cried Milo. “Are you hurt, miss?”

“I should be asking *you* that, shouldn’t I?” she said, before looking over her shoulder at Actagawa. “Whatever. This crab of yours is, like, so cool. I’ve never seen anything like him!”

Suddenly, the girl practically leaped into Milo’s arms, stroking his pale skin and looking up at his face with her large amber eyes. She was a rather small girl with shockingly pink hair tied up in braids that bobbed and swayed like the tentacles of some deep-sea creature.

“Well, now! You’re a real cutie, aren’cha? Mind if I call you Panda, big boy? Those crabs don’t come cheap; I bet you make quite a bit of money, huh? Hey, is there a *Mrs.* Panda?”

A shiver ran down Milo’s spine as the girl whispered in his ear. He desperately shook his head. “N-n-n-no! You misunderstand! Actagawa’s not *my* crab! He’s a...um...friend...of my partner!”

“Tch. Why are all the good men taken? You’re no fun.” The jellyfish girl slipped free of Milo and began examining the giant crab, twiddling a pink braid around her finger. Before long, she broke out in a dastardly grin and turned to Milo, who was eyeing her curiously.

“Hey, Panda Boy. You trying to break this puppy in? There’s a better way, ya know, one that doesn’t involve you eating dirt. You’re supposed to burn yuzu incense; it calms the crab down, and after that, he’ll let you ride him around all you want.”

The jellyfish girl took a yellow vial from her breast pocket and held it toward Milo in her long, thin fingers. Undoing the stopper, she let the fragrant, citrusy scent of yuzu waft out.

“Wow! S-so there *is* a better way! I knew there must be!”

“Indeed there is, my friend. What a shame it is to see your beautiful face covered in nicks and bruises when all you need is a little bit of my incense! Now, let me show you how it’s done!”

“Wow, thank you! Ah, but...I don’t have very much money on me...”

“Heh-heh-heh... Keep your money!” The girl’s amber eyes gleamed like those of a cat. “We have to help each other in these trying times! The only thing I value...is simple human kindness.”

Roughly half a kilometer away, Bisco was staring intently at the small iron pot before his eyes. The red liquid within simmered gently, and when it reached the appropriate stage, Bisco added a pinch of green spores to the mixture. After watching the concoction develop, he took out several metal arrowheads and dropped them into the liquid one by one. It was a very primitive method of mixing potions compared to Milo’s machine.

Bisco made it look easy, but any slight error in the mixing process could cause the mushrooms to sprout immediately with disastrous consequences, and so Bisco handled the apparatus with the utmost delicacy. His concoctions in particular were created to maximize the force behind the fungi’s sudden growth, so it was dangerous for anyone other than him and his master to even touch them.

In return for that risk, Bisco’s poisons were of the highest quality and came with all sorts of unique effects. In particular, the King Trumpet combined the explosive power of a boomshroom with the elasticity of an eggshroom to provide a powerful launching platform. It was Bisco’s greatest invention, and even Jabi was impressed by its ingenuity.

What Bisco had absolutely no talent for, however, was making medicine. To heal people (and crabs), it was necessary to have a good sense for what effects the chemicals had on the body. No matter how much Jabi lectured him on the matter, Bisco was only ever capable of producing extremely potent serums that seemed just as liable to stop the heart as they were to save anyone's life. Thus did Jabi throw his hands up in the air without ever imparting to Bisco any more knowledge of the theory of medicine.

Bisco removed the arrowheads from the pot once the mixture had sufficiently stuck to them and decided to test one out by hurling it at a nearby tree. There was a *Gaboom! Gaboom!* as, one after the other, beautiful red mushrooms burst from the tree's bark and unfurled their thin caps in a shower of spores. They were red oyster mushrooms that would take root even in the dense ore veins of the bonecoal mines.

"Hmm... That should be good enough, I think."

Satisfied with his efforts, Bisco extinguished the bonfire, when—

"Heeelp! Crab thief!"

It had been a while since Bisco had heard Milo's voice. But when he realized *what* he was screaming, his body tensed up.

"Crab thief...?"

He looked in the direction of the voice to see Actagawa running around recklessly in all directions. There in his saddle was a strange girl with a heavy pack. Milo himself was clutching on to the crab's huge claw for dear life as Actagawa shook him up and down violently.

"Y-you tricked me! Let go of him! Give him baaack!" yelled Milo.

"That's not a very nice thing to say! Listen, Panda, it ain't my fault we're living in such hard times! Just give up and let go already!"

From far away, Bisco could just about make out the utter chaos of the scene.

"What the hell is that idiot doing?"

Having seen enough to figure out he needed help, Bisco drew his bow and launched a shot toward them. *Pchew!* It landed directly in a piece of driftweed

floating at around the height of Actagawa's saddle, before rapidly growing with a *Gaboom!* into a cluster of clamshell mushrooms that knocked the girl clean off and sent her rolling down Actagawa's side.

"Gyaaah!"

As the jellyfish girl tried to make her escape, Bisco cut off her path with his subsequent shots, hitting close to her feet and causing the ground to erupt into clamshell clusters.

"Who do you think you're messing with?" he yelled. "You wanna become crab food, huh?!"

"Gyaaah! Waaah!" The jellyfish girl went running for her life, disappearing into the distance before it was even clear whether she heard Bisco's threats. After a short while, Actagawa, deprived of his rider, calmed back down and returned to Bisco's side, depositing Milo onto the ground. Milo tried to wipe the dirt and driftweed off his face, letting out a heavy fit of coughs.

"You idiot! How did you manage to—?"

Bisco was about to launch into a tirade when he saw Milo on the verge of tears, his dejected face covered in cuts and bruises, and decided not to say any more.

"B-Bisco... I'm so sorry... I...!"

"It's fine! Don't apologize... You ain't gonna last much longer today. Let's get moving."

"N-no! We don't have time! I need to learn how to ride him as soon as possible..."

"Not in that state you don't. You're standing like a deer who's just been born. We've still got tomorrow; you just rest and heal your wounds."

"...Okay."

Then Bisco furrowed his brow and began pondering their next move. In truth, he knew it was impossible for Milo, green as he was, to learn how to ride a steelcrab in such a short time. Even among the Mushroom Keepers, there were many who didn't have the mettle for it, and some even resorted to using drugs

or hypnosis to make the crab easier to control.

I could never do that to Actagawa, no matter how much of a hurry we're in, Bisco thought. As he glanced over at Milo, he noticed that the doctor was carrying what little baggage he had in his arms, heading over in Actagawa's direction.

"I'm sorry about earlier, Actagawa. Hold still, and I'll give you some medicine," he said, pulling out a purple vial from his pocket. Seeing it, Actagawa reared up in fright, displaying his fearsome claws in a menacing display of power that put even Bisco on edge. But Milo didn't so much as flinch.

"You mustn't bluff!" he shouted. "Your muscles will grow weak if we ignore it! Now, stand up straight!"

Bisco looked on in shock as Actagawa lowered his mighty claws. Milo smiled and rubbed the crab's white underbelly.

"That's right! Well done! Now, sit!"

Actagawa slowly relaxed before bending his legs and sitting down on the floor. Milo wiped his serum over the creature's joints, producing the fragrant smell of herbs. Afterward, he pet the crab and looked back at Bisco to see him wide-eyed in amazement.

"I'm sorry. I was riding him around so recklessly that he strained some of his muscles. But I've applied a little moonwort, so he should heal while we're on the move!"

Didn't I tell you to heal your own wounds? Bisco thought, walking over with a curious expression and watching him along with the now-calm Actagawa.

"How come you can do *this*, but you can't ride him?"

"Hmm...?" Milo responded. "...Do what?"

"...Heh. Ha-ha-ha! Ah, forget it."

Bisco let out a chuckle and leaped up onto Actagawa's saddle, reaching his arm out to Milo. Milo took it, and Bisco pulled him up into the passenger seat. As Bisco took the reins, Actagawa began walking, and Bisco muttered something to Milo.

“I’m changing the plan. You don’t need any more training. You’ve got talent.”

“Whaaat? B-but you saw what happened! I can’t ride him at all!”

“But you can talk to him. That’s the first time I’ve seen someone talk to a crab before they could ride one.”

Actagawa ran through the desert on his eight giant legs. His temper was replaced with a strange serenity, and his discomfort at the new stranger sitting atop his right shoulder was all but gone.

A pair of enormous tank barrels stuck out of the roof of the ruined temple, pointing toward the sky. The carcasses of armored vehicles littered the temple grounds, overgrown with moss and ferns that now glowed with a faint light in the darkness of the night.

“This temple is called Nikko Sencho-gu,” said Milo to Bisco from atop Actagawa. “It was made to enshrine all the tanks and engines of war that were destroyed when the Rust Wind came. Look, see that gate? It’s made out of gun barrels.”

“What’s that statue?” asked Bisco. “By the gate. Looks like three monkeys in a line.”

“They are the three idols known as See No Evil, Hear No Evil, and Speak No Evil. They embody the Vigilante Corps’ three tenets of blitz warfare. I was told they inherited them from the old Tochigi military.”

“Huh. You sure know a lot.”

“That’s because I went to school.”

“Right... Wait, you callin’ me stupid?” roared Bisco before turning his attention back to the structure of the temple. The iron was pristine and free of rust, but there were no signs of human habitation, and even if the temple was still in use, it didn’t look as if a bunch of armed monks were about to jump out of hiding and attack or anything.

“Okay, let’s camp here for the night,” he said. “The Ashio mines are just a bit farther on. Make sure you treat your own wounds tonight and not just Actagawa’s. Got it?”

“I’ll be fine! I’m a man, too, you know!”

“The smell of blood attracts rock mites. They like to burrow in open wounds; it hurts like hell.”

“Oh... I-I’ll patch myself up, then...”

Leaving Actagawa to sleep in the courtyard, the two entered the main shrine. There in the darkness, they suddenly caught wind of a burning smell and saw the faint glow of a fireplace.

“Someone’s been here before us. Wait here,” said Bisco, pushing Milo back with one hand and drawing his bow. Then he slowly began moving closer to the flames. As he did, he spotted a figure with a familiar head of braided pink hair, swaying unsteadily in the darkness.

“...Huh. Looks like that crab jacker from before. Hey, you. Fancy seeing you here.”

“Uh... Ug... Uh... Kuh... Kuh. Uh... Geh...”

“Hmm? Now that I think about it, didn’t I see you back in Imihama, too? Have you been following us, trying to—?”

As the girl turned around to face Bisco, he stopped. Her eyes were wide and bloodshot, her face was coated in beads of sweat, and she was producing strange, guttural sounds quite unlike any words he had ever heard. Something was very wrong.

“What the hell...?!”

“Bisco, get away from her!” Milo ran up to the girl and slapped her hard on the back. There was a sticky, wet sound as she vomited up a strange white liquid, mixed with blood. Milo gave her a couple more slaps to clear her airways, then he took out a syringe filled with a green liquid from the pouch at his waist and, without hesitation, stuck it into the pale skin of the girl’s throat. As the liquid flowed into her, she became more and more unstable and began shaking violently.

“Watch out, Milo! She’s possessed!”

“There’s something in her stomach! This is going to get messy...!”

After injecting her with his muscle relaxant, Milo took a deep breath and kissed the girl right on the lips.

“Mmph?! Mmmmph!” The girl squirmed, her eyes open wide, and as Milo sucked in with all his might, something began to rise up the girl’s throat, bulging through the skin of her neck. When Milo felt it enter her oral cavity, he bit down on it, hard, and pulled as strongly as he could. Some sort of white bug emerged from the girl’s mouth, about the size of a two-liter bottle. Milo wrenched it free from her throat and spat it onto the ground, where it glistened in a pile of mucus and blood and emitted a shrill squeak. It wriggled across the ground with surprising agility, trying to flee, before Bisco gave it a good kick, and it flew across the room slamming hard into one of the shrine’s pillars, where it fell to the floor, unmoving.

“What the hell was that?”

“A balloonworm,” said Milo, wiping the sweat from his forehead. “They used to use them on slaves so they wouldn’t run away. They make you swallow the eggs, then keep you on an antidote that prevents them from hatching. Nowadays, they’re reserved for prisoners...”

“...Or the governor’s special task force?” said the jellyfish girl angrily as she coughed up the last of the fluid. “I wondered what that weird stuff he was making me drink was. Now I know I should have stuck to normal jobs. That bastard...!”

“Here, drink some water. You might still feel a little nausea, but you’ll be okay now.”

Milo smiled pleasantly at the girl as she gulped down the drink. Soon the color slowly returned to her face, and she calmed down a little.

How can he make a face like that at someone who made such a fool of him earlier? she thought.

Bisco looked at Milo and nodded—either in satisfaction or displeasure, it was hard to tell. Then he walked up behind the pink-haired jellyfish girl and delivered a swift kick to her backside.

“Gnyaagh! Wha—? A-Akaboshi! What are you doing here?!”

“Don’t give me that. First thing outta your mouth should be sayin’ thanks to the good doctor here for saving your life!”

“...Heh. Oh, I don’t think so. I know what you boys want, running to the rescue of a girl out here all by her lonesome...”

The jellyfish girl wiped the gunk from her mouth and brushed her hands over her bare shoulders.

“...You catch my drift? That kiss was, like, amazing. I thought I was gonna drown. But I don’t come cheap, y’know. You gonna pay for that, Panda Boy?”

“...Whaaat?! No, I... I didn’t know that was...!”

“Gosh, you’re so darn cute! It’s fine as long as I’m your patient, right? Doctor...I think there’s another one of those bugs squirming around inside me...”

As the girl pressed up against him, Milo was at a loss for words. As he blushed and stammered, his partner came to his rescue.

“Check yourself, lady! Nobody wants to feel up your scrawny-ass skeleton body anyway!”

“Shows what you know, Akaboshi. I’m worth a lot more than you might think. Hee-hee-hee, I didn’t realize the Man-Eating Redcap was such a virgin...”

“...Whoa, Bisco, calm down!” Milo clung to Bisco in desperation, trying to prevent him from grabbing his bow. Bisco’s eyes were wide, and his hair bristled with rage. “You’re scaring me, Bisco, stop!”

“But she’s a psycho! Aren’t you pissed off at her, too?”

“Shh.” Milo put his finger to his lips and turned to the girl with a smile. “Hey, listen, miss. Am I right in assuming you’re a merchant? We don’t have very much food, you see. Would you mind sharing some with us?”

The jellyfish girl blinked a few times in surprise, staring blankly at the carefree face of the doctor she had tried to swindle not too long ago.

“Wait... Are you guys really not after my body?” she asked. “If all ya wanted was my stock, you coulda just waited for me to die and then helped yourselves to a five-finger discount.”

The two boys looked at each other for a second, then spoke.

“Huh. I didn’t think about that—”

“Wh-wh-what he means is: We didn’t think about material goods when someone’s life was in danger! Isn’t that right, Bisco?”

Bisco shut his mouth and adopted a grumpy silence as Milo secretly pinched his wrist beneath his cloak. Taken aback by the bizarre duo, the jellyfish girl heaved a deep sigh before dropping the flirty act and plopping down onto the ground cross-legged, her head in her hands, looking on in amusement.



“Looks like I’ve been rescued by a couple o’ wusses. I dunno if that’s a good thing or not. I guess the whole ‘sex sells’ thing isn’t true when you’re dealing with hopeless virgins!”

She shook her head in despair. The girl was like a completely different person without her earlier behavior. She spread a red cloth across the ground and lit a lantern, before quickly laying her merchandise across it. Even Bisco forgot his anger when he saw the wide variety of items she had in stock and leaned in for a closer look.

“Welp, I guess that just means I get to show my business chops! Welcome, both of you, to Jellyfish General!”

“Jellyfish General? That’s pretty funny. Is that your name?” asked Milo.

“Oh, my poor, sweet Panda Boy. No merchant in their right mind would give people their name in this day and age,” said the jellyfish girl, twirling a braid in her finger. “It’s my hair. Don’t you think the braids make me look like a jellyfish? This is so my customers have an easy time remembering me. Hence the name.”

“...Just like ya said, you got all sorts of crazy stuff here. Holy shit, this wine says it’s from 2017! Is this real?!”

“I specialize in weapons and military schematics, but I have plenty of food for sale, too! How about this? One-hundred-percent pure scorpion nectar; it’ll melt your tongue right off! Oh, I’ve also got this—vanilla vodka from Weeping Solomon Brewery... Perhaps it’s a little early for you boys to be enjoying this, though!”

Bisco’s eyes sparkled as she showed off the goods one by one, until a tug at his cloak from Milo brought him back to his senses.

“Hey, we don’t want any of your fancy stuff; we just need some food. You got any charcoal toast, salted mochi, anything like that?”

“...Salted mochi? I ain’t running a food bank out here!”

Seeing the merchant girl’s face twist in disgust, Milo hurriedly looked around for something to change the subject, before spotting a pile of biscuits in the corner of the spread.

“Look, Bisco! Butter-flavored Biscos! You must like those, right? Let’s get them!”

“...Nah, I’ve never had ’em, actually,” replied Bisco, looking quite embarrassed. “I’ve seen ’em before, but they’re kinda hard for Mushroom Keepers to get ahold of, so...”

“Your name is Bisco, and you’ve never had Biscos...? Milo looked as if he was about to faint from shock, then quickly broke into a smile. “Well then, we’d better buy some! This will be your first time! Excuse me, how much are they?”

“Those old things? Four sols each.”

“What?! You’re still trying to bleed us dry?!” roared Bisco in anger.

“Of course I am! The bow is your weapon, right? Well, mine’s the coin!” The girl’s pink braids bounced as she shoved her face toward Bisco’s. “And anyway, you owe me! If you weren’t so damn strong, I’d have collected your bounty already! So stop being stingy and pay up!”

Her argument was so outrageous it actually sounded sort of convincing. As the two looked at each other, the girl snatched the bills out of their hands and tossed the box of Biscos toward them before folding away her shop in disappointment.

“What a boring trade. I can’t even sell you fuel ’cause you’re on a crab. I’m going to sleep. Touch me, and it’s a hundred sols—got it?”

The girl went over to the entrance and emptied a container of expired liquid bonecoal on the ground outside.

“Nobody wants to touch your stingers, you damn jellyfish!” said Bisco.

“I’ll allow a fifty percent discount just for you, Panda Boy.”

“Go to sleep already!”

Bisco glared daggers at the girl as she pulled the empty container back inside. Suddenly, he felt Milo tugging at his sleeve.

“There’s no use getting mad, Bisco. It’ll only make you hungrier. Here, have one of these!”

Milo took out several Biscos from the box and placed them in Bisco's hand. Bisco looked down at Milo's sparkling eyes and, unable to argue, gingerly put one in his mouth.

"How is it? That's what you were named after! ...Is it not what you expected?"

"I thought they'd be...y'know, harder. They're supposed to make kids big and strong, right? I figured they'd taste more...nutritious, like bear liver or something."

"Ah-ha-ha! Of course they wouldn't taste like that; they're snacks! So do you like them?"

"Yeah, they're not bad," Bisco replied, munching on them with unusual speed, reaching for a second box, then a third. "...So this is what you city folks eat all the time..."

"H-hold on, Bisco! Slow down! Save some for me!"

"How come? I'm bigger than you are. Obviously, I should get to eat a little more."

"Wasn't it you who said we were equals?!"

Bisco cut back on the teasing and handed over half the remaining biscuits to Milo, nibbling on the rest sparingly. Milo looked over at him with a smile and began to eat them one by one.

In the middle of the night, Milo carefully got out of bed without waking Bisco and made his way to the courtyard where Actagawa was sleeping. There he was, slumbering under the dazzlingly moonlit night.

"...What amazing resilience. You're no ordinary crab, Actagawa."

To have struggled alongside Bisco for all these years, he must surely have been a hardy creature indeed. Milo silently ran his fingertips over the crab's joints to check the status of his tendons. All of a sudden, Actagawa awoke and slowly rose to his feet.

"Ah...! Sorry, Actagawa, I didn't mean to wake—"

Milo stopped midsentence as he realized Actagawa was behaving strangely and strained his ears to listen. There was a distant rumbling coming from far

below, and soon he felt the ground shake.

“Earthquake...? No, that’s not it...!” As Milo looked back toward the temple, the flagstones of the floor split open, and great gouts of steam erupted from the cracks. Then the entire temple began shaking as it gradually rose off the ground.

Milo let out a scream. Unable to keep his footing any longer, he collapsed against Actagawa’s legs. The giant crab lifted him up in one claw and placed him atop the saddle, before launching himself away from the temple and onto the moss-covered floor below.

Then, as Actagawa struggled to regain his balance, they saw it. Before them was a pair of enormous eyes, their yellow gleam piercing the dark of night like car headlights. Two forelegs the size of tree trunks struck the ground, sending the rusted vehicles that were piled there flying into the air like so many scraps of paper.

“The temple’s alive!” shouted Milo as he shook with fear in Actagawa’s saddle. “They didn’t just worship weapons here; the temple itself is one giant animal weapon!”

It was most similar in appearance to a hermit crab, but it was about three times the size of Actagawa, who was already twice the size of a human. It was a monstrous weapon, like a battleship.

It charged, tearing up the land in its path, and Actagawa barely managed to dodge it. The “temple” seemed uninterested, as though it had a destination in mind, and began moving toward it.

“Bisco! Actagawa, Bisco’s still inside!”

Actagawa raced after it before Milo even finished speaking. For the first time, the rookie Mushroom Keeper and the seasoned veteran were united in purpose. And what speed! For a second, Milo felt as though he were riding a roller coaster rather than a crab. It was all he could do to simply cling to the reins in terror. As Actagawa kept pace with the temple, Milo could see the remains of the memorialized tanks that covered his body. One by one, they turned their turrets to face him and fired off a volley of shells. Actagawa leaped forward and sideways, evading them all.

“Look out, above us!” shouted Milo, and Actagawa swung his mighty claw, deflecting one of the shells. It exploded, taking out several tanks.

“Gyaaah! No, no, no! Don’t leave me behind! I don’t wanna diiiiie!”

“Grrr, let go of me, you idiot! Dammit, how are you so strong?!”

“Bisco? Is that you? Where are you, Bisco?!”

Milo spotted Bisco atop the roof of the main shrine, his red hair and cloak fluttering in the moonlight. There at his feet, the backpack-laden jellyfish girl clung on for dear life.

“Milo! This thing’s a Coal-Eating Shrimp! It’s woken up because of the fuel this jellyfish girl threw out last night! If it makes it to the Ashio coal mines, it’ll blow the whole place up, and we won’t be able to use the minecart!”

As if responding to his voice, the tanks’ machine guns pointed at Bisco and fired. Bisco tucked the screaming girl underneath his arm and leaped away, dodging all of them, but the surprising force with which she clutched onto him caused him to lose his balance and fall off the roof.

“It’s no use. I can’t fight this thing *and* look after the jellyfish! You’re gonna have to stop it somehow, Milo!”

“Stop it?! How am I supposed to stop something this huge?!”

“Crack his skull open!” As a tank turret turned toward him, Bisco fired an arrow to block the barrel, causing it to self-destruct. “If you can rattle his brains, it might just stop these tanks as well! Use Actagawa! Smash him in the face with his claw!”

“That’s too hard! I barely know how to ride him!”

Bisco was about to respond when a tank turret swung around. The last thing Milo saw was Bisco moving to protect the girl, before he was engulfed in a cloud of white smoke.

“Aaagh! Biscooo!”

There was nothing more frightening than being in such a dangerous situation without his partner to guide him. And yet Milo suppressed the fear threatening to overwhelm him. He took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly.

Bisco said I have to stop it. He knew I could do it. He had faith in me... Okay, Bisco. I'll do it. Just you watch!

When he opened his eyes, they burned with newfound determination. Placing his cheek on Actagawa's back, he gently brushed his finger over the giant crab's head.

"Actagawa... This is his weak point," he whispered. "If we hit him there, Bisco can take care of the rest... Actagawa... Do you think you can do that for me?"

A single bubble rose from the crab's mouth and burst before Milo's eyes. Milo wasn't sure, but it seemed to be a sign of Actagawa's approval. Suddenly, there was an explosion as a tank shell impacted the ground. Milo pulled the reins, steering Actagawa toward it, and the crab launched his enormous body into the air. Landing directly on the temple roof, Actagawa quickly made for the main entrance and, with a swing of his claws, lifted the towering gate of gun barrels clean out of the ground.

"Yes! Go, Actagawa!"

Actagawa sprang up, past the newly formed cliff, all the way to the Coal-Eating Shrimp's forehead. There, he turned and swung the gate like a colossal ax, smashing it between the creature's eyes!

It was a blow like out of a monster movie, and steel and shell alike splintered. The impact threw up a cloud as the giant shrimp staggered back, raising its mantis-like forelegs in defiance. Then a figure ran up the shrimp's claw, bursting out of the cloud with a flash of red hair!

"Bisco!"

He somersaulted through the air silhouetted against the silver moonlight, throwing the unconscious girl toward Milo and drawing his bow while still upside down.

"What did I say?" He grinned. "You've got talent."

Milo caught the jellyfish girl just as Bisco fired his first shot. A red streak flew through the air and embedded itself within the crack opened up by Actagawa, deep inside the creature's brain. The mycelium spread out of the hole and across the shrimp's body, and then huge redcaps burst into being all over.

Gaboom! Gaboom! Gaboom!

Bisco fell down and landed in Actagawa's waiting saddle, then the group speedily made their escape from the rampaging monster. Hiding beneath a red oyster mushroom on a nearby hillock, they watched the creature's final moments.

"...That was close," said Bisco when it was all over. "Another half a kilometer, and he and the whole bonecoal mines would have been blasted to smithereens."

"Haah...haah...haah... Bisco...", said Milo. Finally becoming aware of just how much the ordeal exhausted him, he drooped his shoulders and fought back his dizziness. "Do you always have to fight creatures like this?"

"Nah. I never fought a living temple before." Bisco gave a carefree laugh, as if unfazed by the battle. "But there's always scarier foes on the horizon. That's just our fate. The fate of Mushroom Keepers."

"...I'm not sure that's the fate of every Mushroom Keeper; just you...", muttered Milo softly. It seemed as though Bisco didn't hear him, for he pointed at the Ashio mountains that towered before them and said, "We can see the entrance to the mines from here. That's where they collect all the bonecoal and where we'll find the minecart. Tomorrow we'll ride Actagawa over there, and then—"

Bisco was cut off by a boom, like a clap of thunder. The two peered over their shoulders toward the source of the sound and saw the great shrimp that had been Nikko Sencho-gu. In a final swan song, it had lifted its largest cannon into the night sky and fired.

"...Ah."

The smooth jet-black projectile arced through the sky and fell toward the Ashio mountains, toward the place Bisco had just been pointing at, toward that powder keg, and impacted the earth like a meteorite.

Kaboom!

There was an earth-shattering explosion, and Milo and Bisco were struck by a wall of sand and hot air that sent their cloaks fluttering.

“Aaarghhh! Dammit! You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“There’s boulders raining down from the sky! Come on, Actagawa, we have to get out of here!”

From atop Actagawa, they watched as the entire mountain burned, fueled by the enormous stockpiles of bonecoal within. The flames cast a scarlet glow into the night sky, causing dozens of explosions as they spread.

“Dammit! We were so close! Now we’ll never be able to use the minecart!”

“Bisco...”

Milo stopped Actagawa in a safe place and, not knowing how he should respond, simply looked at Bisco with sympathy. However, Bisco’s lament lasted all of five seconds.

“...Welp, it’s not like it’s impossible now. If the minecart doesn’t work, we’ll just have to find another way through.”

Bisco took a deep breath, puffed out his chest in anger, and glared at the burning mountains.

“Besides, as long as the mushrooms keep eating up that oversized seafood, then all the rust around this area should disappear. That should please the old man more than your life ever did.” Here Bisco turned at last to the huge creature, which by now had breathed its last and returned to nature. His glimmering emerald eyes twinkled. As Milo watched him in profile, he felt a deep pain lurking beneath Bisco’s stoic facade. He searched for some consoling words, but in the end, he was unable to think of anything appropriate to say.

The sun’s light warmed his eyelids. Bisco gave a low groan and slowly rose to his feet. Scratching his belly, he looked around with tired, droopy eyes. The grasslands twinkled in the summer sun, and clumps of verdant driftweed floated steadily in the breeze.

“Ah, Bisco! Good morning!” Milo tidied up the insect-repelling incense and hurried over to Bisco. “How are your wounds? ...Hmm, they seem to be healing up nicely. Let me know if they get swollen, okay?”

“Erm, what about the jellyfish? Was she, ya know, hurt?”

“Just some scratches, but she’ll be fine. I’ve already tended to her. I’ll go and check on her now!”

Bisco scratched his neck at the unfamiliar sensation of Milo’s bandages. Then he heard the all-too-familiar sound of Milo’s scream.

“Ahhhh! She’s gone, Bisco! And she took all my money!” said Milo, rummaging through Actagawa’s saddlebags. “Ooh... It’s a good thing we agreed to split our money between us.”

“She can’t have gotten far. When I catch her, I’m gonna make her into seafood.”

“Ah, Bisco, wait!”

Fishing around in the saddlebags, Milo suddenly pulled out candies, beans, and other preserved foods. Finally, he came upon a single scrap of paper and showed it to Bisco with an awkward smile.

ATTN Man-Eating Redcap and company. A sum total of eighty-seven sols and seventy sen has been extracted as payment for foodstuffs provided.

In the corner of the handwritten receipt, a note in rounded letters with a lovely chocolate heart read: *PS: Panda Boy, if Bisco dies, come team up with me, okay?* ♡

“She picked out quite a lot for us,” said Milo. “And here I called her a thief.”

“Forcing us to buy her junk’s not much different!” Bisco huffed and leaped atop Actagawa behind Milo. Then he noticed that Actagawa was used to Milo, and he wasn’t throwing him off like before.

“...?” Bisco looked questioningly at his partner’s face, rudely monitoring him. While it was clear Milo had taken efforts to treat it, his face was covered in small nicks and bruises, and his eyes were evidently baggy from lack of sleep.

“When did you...?”

Milo, upon realizing his face was being scrutinized, froze and held his breath, and his gaze wandered. It was obvious to Bisco that Milo had spent the whole morning struggling with the unruly Actagawa—and that he had finally won the crab over after being thrown to the ground god knows how many times. As Milo

hurried to hide his cuts, Bisco laughed, tickled by the doctor's strange sense of pride that caused him to hide the marks he ought to have been proud of.

"Heh. Heh-heh-heh..."

"Wh-what's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing...!"

Bisco lashed the reins once. Actagawa saw that, beside his smiling master, the novice he had trained with since dawn was sitting with a somewhat dissatisfied expression. Nevertheless, the steelcrab moved his eight legs into gear and set off leisurely over the grassy plains.

The sound of hurried footsteps rang out against the linoleum floor of the prefectural bureau. One of the beefy rabbit-headed men in black rushed down the corridor and pushed aside an intern holding a stack of papers, scattering the sheets in the air.

There was no busier place in all of Imihama right now than the prefectural bureau, as builders, scientists, vigilantes, and clerks all scrambled to exterminate Akaboshi's mushrooms and repair the damage to the town. Even so, this man seemed in a particular hurry as he stopped in front of a single black door and knocked.

"Come in," came a deep, calm, yet strangely agitated voice. The rabbit-headed man collected himself, then slowly opened the door.

The room beyond was vast and dark. The light of a movie projector flickered, casting a low-quality image onto a screen on one wall. On it, a black man wearing a suit and tie indulged in a tasty-looking burger and preached religion while shooting a bunch of terrified white guys. At a desk a short distance from the screen, a man sat playing with a fruit of some kind, not paying much attention to the movie.

"Do you know what an Angel's Kiss is? If you take a yezu mango and pickle it in seal dung, it ferments and turns into alcohol. Apparently, the entire country is enamored with its sweetness, so I sent for some from Ibaraki. Indeed, you may call me a simple man, influenced by the fashions of the day, but as prefectural governor, I ought to keep my finger on the pulse of what entertains the enlightened classes these days, no?"

Governor Kurokawa took a spoon and scooped out some of the mango's flesh. He sniffed it a few times, gave a not entirely repulsed look, and then took a bite.

“Mmm...mm...” Kurokawa turned the fruit over in his mouth, savoring the taste, as the rabbit-headed man looked on with a fixed smile. “How to describe it? It tastes a bit like mashed giraffe brains.”

Then Kurokawa threw the Angel’s Kiss, spoon and all, at the wall, shattering a glass shelf and sending mango bits dripping off the walls and nearby furniture, filling the room with a cloyingly sweet scent.

“They play me for a fool. Ibaraki can forget about their financial support in the future.”

“Governor. I have news you’ll want to hear. We believe that Akaboshi is—”

“—Still alive?” Kurokawa opened a drawer and took out a Mentos mint, popping it in his mouth to remove the mango taste. “Even after our little explosion at the Ashio Bonecoal Mines, he lives. Rising from the flames, like the Terminator... I see. So that’s how it’s going to be. I look forward to seeing how things pan out in the sequel.”

“Excuse me, sir, but...that explosion was not carried out by our men.” A torrent of sweat dripped down the man’s neck. “We observed fungal growths on a large animal artillery platform that was defeated in the area. We believe the creature may have—”

“—caused the explosion by mistake?” Kurokawa roared with laughter, accidentally toppling a cola bottle and ruining the documents on his desk. “Ha! Ha! Ha-ha! Whew... I see. In other words, the squad we sent to roast the Akaboshi party alive...were themselves roasted alive. A squad of nearly fifty men.”

“This was outside even our wildest expectations. I am truly sorry we have suffered such a great loss in the midst of a personnel shortage...!”

“Well, those fifty men would have died in the explosion either way. That part doesn’t bother me. Hmm. Looks like I was right to keep an eye on the mines after all.” Kurokawa paused for a moment and righted the bottle on his desk before taking a swig. “Is he simply lucky? No... I feel strange powers at work, Akaboshi.”

Kurokawa stared into empty space with his deep, dark eyes. Then, *crash!* The

door to the room was blown off its hinges, and in stepped the silver-haired warrior woman, her coat billowing behind. Kurokawa, on the other hand, seemed almost amused by the woman's rude behavior.

"Please do remember to knock. You vigilante types are always so violent. What would you have done if the bunny gentleman here and I had been having an affair, locked in passionate embrace upon the table? You'd have looked quite the fool then."

"Apologies. But protecting the governor from this town's miscreants is also one of my duties."

The captain of the Vigilante Corps, Pawoo, glared at Kurokawa with eyes of burning sapphire. The rabbit-headed man had moved to seize her as she entered, only for Pawoo to effortlessly brush him aside, sending him crashing into Kurokawa's manga collection, where he now sat with his head hung in defeat.

"You know where Akaboshi is!" cried Pawoo. Her cold voice froze the room. "Why haven't you authorized a squad to go after him?! That man should not be allowed to walk free!"

"Now, where did you hear that? Have you been menacing my poor rabbits?"

Kurokawa walked over to a small refrigerator and pulled out his favorite, Fanta Grape, offering one to Pawoo. When she didn't take it, he gave a small shrug and continued.

"No matter. In any case, I'm afraid I can't do that. We need as many men as possible to stay here and aid the repair efforts. Supposedly there's one more Mushroom Keeper here in the city, too. Am I supposed to send men outside the city walls before we've even taken care of ourselves?"

"That's no reason to—"

"Nekoyanagi, please. I tire of this banal affair."

It was as if the air in the room suddenly grew stale and heavy. Kurokawa's deep voice caused Pawoo to freeze, and his sullen, pitch-black eyes pierced her very soul.

“Why won’t you just admit it?” he said. “You want to save him. Your dear, sweet prince who was carried away from you.”

Kurokawa pressed a button in his hand, and the image on the screen changed. Now it showed a redheaded man escaping over the city walls with another man who had sky-blue hair. It was an image captured by a security camera on the wall as the pair launched themselves out of the city on a mushroom. Pawoo’s breath stopped in her throat, and Kurokawa gave her a sidelong glance as he sipped his Fanta.

“I’ve told him this many times before, but your brother really is a thing of beauty.” Kurokawa tapped the button again, and the image zoomed in on Milo’s face. “If he didn’t have this birthmark, he would truly be perfection. What a shame. Still... Heh. It just doesn’t strike me as the face of a captured princess, don’t you think?”

Pawoo had noticed it, too. Milo’s expression as Bisco carried him over the walls was not entirely one of fear. Instead, he looked peaceful, as though he trusted the man-eating terrorist beside him with his life.

Milo... Why?!

Kurokawa lowered his voice and delivered a stern warning. “It may very well be the case that your little brother has been aiding and abetting a terrorist. What happens to him now is none of my concern. You coming here will not change that.”

“Sir, please!”

“Relax, we’ll find him...eventually. Perhaps his body will be riddled with fungi. Now wouldn’t *that* be a sight to behold?”

Pawoo struggled to contain her rage, holding down her fists, biting back her anger, until her lip bled crimson and stained the ground with droplets. Up until this point, Kurokawa had not shown so much as a smile despite his wisecracks. However, now his lips creaked up into a grin. A bone-chilling, diabolical smile for all who gazed upon it.

“Excuse...me...”

As Pawoo unsteadily exited the room, Kurokawa called out mockingly,

“Nekoyanagi! I do hope our warrior princess isn’t thinking of chasing after him alone! If you do, I might have to charge you both with the same crime. Am I clear?”

As the door slammed behind her, Kurokawa chuckled to himself, choking back his voice. When he stopped, his breath ragged, he pressed his button again and focused the image on Bisco’s face. He walked up close to it and gazed almost lovingly at the sight.

“That little ankle biter is all grown up. Akaboshi... Just look at your face. Such a strong face... But you *are* strong, aren’t you? Far stronger than any of us. Far stronger than me.”

Deep within their blackened sockets, Kurokawa’s eyes were glued to Bisco’s face, which burst with youthful charm. He muttered to himself, neither hatred nor ecstasy in his voice.

“The Mushroom Keepers’ finest. At last, you appear before me. Akaboshi. I will kill you. I will remove your head from your body. I will tickle you under the armpits and see if you laugh. And then...” With trembling hands, Kurokawa took a jar of pills from his desk and threw his head back, rattling them into his mouth and crunching them between his teeth.

“And then, I will sleep soundly, without the help of these pills that turn my piss red.”

For a while, Kurokawa put all that had just happened out of his mind and simply gazed upon Bisco’s visage.

“Just you wait, Akaboshi...”

As if he were a young boy looking at a photo of his crush.

It was the beginning of August. A still, clear morning without so much as a breeze. The thin water's surface reflected the sky above like a mirror, and the bright hues of the shellsand made it look as if one were walking through a sky of multicolored diamonds.

This was the Calvero Shellsand Sea, about fifty kilometers north of Imihama. This vast lake atop a sand made of beautiful seashells spread all the way from the northern reaches of Tochigi to southern Shimobuki. Once, this was the realm of one of Fukushima's great megacorps, known as Calvero Jewelry. They perfected a method by which jewels could be crafted from synthetic seashells instead of being dug out of the ground, but when the Rust Wind came, it ground down their factories like it did to so many others. Here and there, you could still spot ruined tower blocks jutting out of the landscape, but the rest of the land was covered in a fine sand of jeweled seashells. The miniscule water-and-salt content of the shellsand led to a thin film of water that covered the Shellsand Sea and gave it an indescribable beauty quite far from the deserts of Saitama.

However, the two young Mushroom Keepers had little time to contemplate such beauty as they moved across the land atop their giant crab, their bodies racked with hunger and unease.

"Actagawa, please find us some food. I'm begging you, please..."

As the party was forced to detour from their initial route through the Ashio Bonecoal Mines, they decided to head to Shimobuki by way of the Shellsand Sea. It was the only choice given how little time Jabi had remaining.

"Ohh... So...so hungry..." Milo muttered to himself. Despite the Shellsand Sea's beauty, journeying across it was harsh. The vast expanse of water held nothing fit for human consumption. Even if they grew their stock of edible mushrooms nearby, the mushrooms themselves contained next to no calories

and would do little to sate their ravenous hunger. Even Actagawa, who could normally subsist on almost anything, found nothing to eat in this land, and as his strength faded, his walking speed slowed.

The foodstuffs left by the jellyfish girl had come in handy—and probably saved their lives, all things considered. But the bulk of it had gone to Actagawa, and they had reached the end of their stores some time ago.

“...Bisco...”

Milo looked over at his partner, who seemed irritated even during the best of times. Now he appeared particularly upset, not only from the hunger clawing at his belly, but also because the fate of his master loomed ever present at the back of his mind. Though Milo was starving, he didn’t want to bother him with his whining and, instead, was trying to put on a brave face, when...

“...Milo. Are you hungry?” asked Bisco.

“...Y-yeah!”

Bisco slapped Milo on the back of the head.

“Next time I hear you complain, you’re getting two slaps.”

“I wouldn’t have said it if you didn’t ask!”

“...Hey, what’re they?”

Milo followed where Bisco was pointing and saw a short plant growing out of the shellsand, with large leaves that swayed in the water. At its center were four large red fruits, glistening and juicy.

“Th-they’re watermelons!”

“Watermelons!”

Milo’s cadaver-like face brightened up in a flash at the sight of the fruit, known as redball melons, and Bisco pulled the reins with newfound vigor, excited to finally find Actagawa something decent to eat. But just then, a small shadow jogged up and approached the plant. As Bisco and Milo looked on in horror, the figure swept up all four of the fruits and tossed them one by one into a basket on their back, before returning the way they had come. The figure had some sort of large snail shell on their head as a helmet and was wearing a

shirt and pants of simple make. They didn't look to be much more than a child.

"What's a child doing all the way out here? Could there be some sort of settlement nearby? What do you think, Bis—?"

But as Milo turned to Bisco, he saw the rage on his partner's face and held his tongue.

"Get the hell back here, kid! Give us that basket!"

Bisco's hunger gave rise to incredible rage, and he whipped Actagawa into gear and started chasing the young child down. The kid looked over his shoulder to see a giant steelcrab bearing down on him, a veritable demon atop the saddle. He leaped into the air with a yelp and took off across the shellsand like a lightning bolt.

"B-Bisco! Let him go! Look at how scared he is; don't you feel sorry for him?!"

"You should be feelin' sorry for *us*! That kid just stole our food!"

Bisco pressed on despite Milo's pleading, when all of a sudden, the crack of a rifle rang out in the air, and a bullet hole at his feet stopped Actagawa in his tracks.

"...!"

Bisco grimaced and looked up in the direction of the shot.

"Don't you thugs feel ashamed, trying to kidnap a child?!" echoed a voice from up above. A voice rich in determination—but with a high pitch that suggested it belonged to a young boy. "You aren't getting away this time! I'm sending you back to Kurokawa full of holes!"

Bisco and Milo found themselves surrounded, rifles pointing at them from out of strange structures that towered before them and looked like giant dolls. It seemed that, in their hunger, the Akaboshi party had gotten themselves tangled up in quite a sticky situation.

"We ain't interested in the kid," said Bisco, pushing the terrified Milo down into his seat. "We just want somethin' to eat. I dunno who these guys are you're talking about, but we ain't your enemies. We just happened to be passin' through!"

There was a small pause, then the boy replied.

“Then turn yourselves right back around, strangers. Try anything funny, and we’ll blow your brains out!”

“You’re unhinged, kid. Look, we just need some food; now hand it over.” Bisco refused to back down. “This crab—and this guy, he’s a doctor—they both need feedin’. We got money. We can pay.”

“I don’t care; just get out of here! We Calvero fishermen don’t make empty threats!”

“He must be in his rebellious phase,” Bisco said, sighing as he fiddled around in the pack on Milo’s back and pulled out a single scrap of paper. “Sure am glad I kept one of these.”

“Kept one of...what...?” asked Milo as his eyes fell upon the paper in his hand. Bisco held it up alongside his head so two identical faces leered back at the boy. It was his own wanted poster.

“I’m Bisco Akaboshi, the Man-Eating Redcap! Japan’s most wanted! Take me back to Imihama alive, and you’ll be given eight hundred thousand sols! That’s enough to buy a dozen houses within the city walls instead of living out here in the sticks!”

“W-w-waaaah! Bisco, what on earth are you doing?!” Forgetting his fear, Milo shook Bisco by the lapels. “What are you thinking?! If you get caught, that’s not just the end of our journey; you’ll be killed!”

Meanwhile, a buzz of voices passed through the hole-filled buildings of the village. Strangely, they all seemed to belong to young children, boys and girls.

“Akaboshi?”

“The Man-Eating Redcap!”

“He’s here? For real?”

“Did you hear that? Eight hundred thousand sols!”

While they were distracted, Bisco took the opportunity to whisper to Milo without breaking his wicked grin.

“It’s the only way we’re gonna be able to feed Actagawa. They’ve got a village here, so there must be somewhere we can get food. Once we fill him up, we just wait for our chance and get the hell outta here. I’d like to take all they got, but from the looks of things, it’s just a bunch of kids out here. I don’t wanna leave ’em without anything at all.”

“...Yeah, okay,” replied Milo. It was strange. When Bisco spoke, suddenly the impossible didn’t sound so impossible anymore. “Hey, what should I do? Do you have a plan?”

“Of course not,” said Bisco. “Don’t need one.”

Just as they finished conferring, a troupe of young children, all armed and wearing their own unique shell helmets, marched in front of Actagawa, crunching the shellsand beneath their feet as they walked. The boy at their front was wearing a shark mask and the shell of a turban snail on his head. From his speech earlier, it sounded as if he was their leader.

“...Huh. I guess you really are Akaboshi. Now why would you show up on our doorstep, ready to turn yourself in?”

“I forgot outlaws still need to eat. The crab, the panda, and me, we all need food. Give us some, and then you can take me to Imihama.”

“We can tie you up, but how do we know that panda’s not going to try anything?”

“He won’t. If he does, you can shoot all three of us.” Bisco appeared to be quickly getting tired of arguing every little detail. “So? Are you tying me up or what? Get on with it!”

The turban snail boy thrust his rifle in Bisco’s face and was a little perturbed to get no response. Attempting to regain his pride, he called out to two of his subordinates.

“Plum, Kousuke! Tie him up and take away his things. As for this crab... Ugh... He’s pretty big... He might get mad if we try to tie him up. Go get Kewpie and have him help.”

“I wonder if Kewpie will be enough, Nuts. He looks really strong. Maybe we should feed him some numbing toxins or something...”

As the children conferred among themselves in worried tones, a single bright, cheery voice rang out. “Oh! It’s okay!” said Milo. “Actagawa will stay calm if Bisco and I ask him to!” As he clumsily descended from the saddle, he tripped and fell face-first into the colorful shellsand below. Picking himself up, he shook his head like a dog, sending bits flying out of his sopping-wet blue hair. He gave an embarrassed cough and then whispered into Actagawa’s ear while stroking his belly.

“We’re going to be stopping here for a while. It’s okay; don’t be nervous...”

At Milo’s gentle behavior, one of the soldiers delicately lowered her rifle.

“Wh-what a wonderful person...”

“H-hey, Plum! Don’t let Nuts hear you say that!”

“I can hear all of you, you idiots!” The two lackeys froze in fright at the sound of the turban snail boy’s voice. It seemed he was called Nuts, and judging by the conversation, it sounded like even in this desolate place, these kids had not lost their childlike curiosity and emotion.

“O-okay, we’ve tied up Akaboshi. I-i-is that too tight? I can loosen it if you want...”

“You blockhead! He’s a villain; don’t you know that?! Too tight is too good for him! Now start walking, buddy!”

“Heh-heh-heh. What bright young kids. The future’s in good hands.”

Annoyed by Bisco’s joviality, Nuts gave him a kick in the rear. Meanwhile, the girl named Plum struggled with a pair of handcuffs as she attempted to place them on Milo’s outstretched hands.

“I think you’re supposed to put the key in that hole there. Here, if I turn my hands around...”

“L-like this?”

“Yeah, then the key goes in there... There you go; well done!”

Milo held up his manacled wrists and smiled at Plum. Beneath her spider conch cap, the girl’s face went red as a beet, and she pulled Milo along with her head hung in embarrassment.

As several kids on the upper levels turned a handle, the elevator containing the five people began to rise. Even by the standards of a world where human civilization was all but forgotten, this village had a rather primitive way of doing things.

Milo leaned over so Nuts couldn't hear and whispered in Kousuke's ear.

"Hey, there's something strange about the shape of this town. What is it built on?"

"T-Tetsujin," the boy took great pains to whisper back, as if he had trouble controlling the volume of his own voice. "The thing that destroyed Tokyo. We drilled inside it and built this town. At least, that's what the grown-ups used to say."

This is Tetsujin? They made a town inside its body?

Upon closer inspection, Milo could make out the iron giant's upper torso. Tents and hammocks were hung from the metal ribs that extended from its exposed spine, creating an eclectic mix of personalized living spaces. Above them, the head of the giant looked down on the town, its mouth agape, whatever expression it once had on its face now long gone.

Tetsujin, the source of the explosion that wiped out the Greater Tokyo Area and set the Rust Wind upon the land, blighting it. This baleful symbol of humankind's ruin ought to have been shunned in disgust, and for many years it was. But as calamity became memory, and memory became words in a history book, this tombstone was born anew as a town for an emerging era of humanity. As Milo gazed upon it, he felt the weight of its history bearing down on him. And for a while, he could do nothing but stare in wonder, forgetting to even blink.

As the elevator settled into position, Nuts stepped off in the direction of a staircase leading up even higher.

"Plum, you look after the panda. Akaboshi, you're coming with me. Kousuke, you come, too."

"Should we feed them?" asked the girl.

"That was the deal... Pass the news on to Kewpie as well."

Nuts disappeared up the staircase, pulling Bisco behind him by the rope. Kousuke rushed off after him, looking over his shoulder anxiously a few times, his pond snail hat wobbling atop his head.

“Come here; I’ll make you something to eat,” said Plum afterward, and she led Milo to a tent where there were some simple cooking utensils. There she sat Milo down and left, returning a short while later with a bowl of food that looked as though it was left over from the night before.

“Oh my gosh, what a lovely stew!”

“Don’t be silly; it’s just clams boiled in milk— Whoa, hold on! Don’t spill it!”

“Mm, mng, mm... Paaah! Wow, this is so good!”

Milo noisily slurped down the stew, still in his handcuffs. The satisfaction on his face was no lie. He had been without food and drink for quite some time, and Milo, who was rather slim at the best of times, was now starting to look as though he might snap in half like a twig. From the enthusiastic way he devoured his meal, Plum received a pretty good idea of how much his body had been craving even just a single bowl of soup.

Plum looked a little uneasy at having to watch Milo fumble with the dish, and eventually she undid Milo’s cuffs.

“Thank you... Wait, are you sure?” said Milo.

“Well, I can’t leave you like that; it’s too dangerous... Hey, if you’re so hungry, you can have some of my sea slug sashimi. I have some that’s about to turn.”

“You’re going to make me something else?”

“Wait here; I’ll go make it now...”

As he watched Plum retrieve some colorful sea slugs from the fridge and set about preparing them with a kitchen knife in hand, he cast a glance outside at the town. All the boys were holding dangerous-looking guns, half of them so badly corroded by the Rust that it was dubious whether they would even still fire.

“Hey,” he said. “How come everyone in this town is armed? Are there bandits around?”

“...A long time ago, some army guys from Imihama used to come and fight with the grown-ups. Now, though, we hardly ever use them on people.”

“So you use them to fight animals?”

“Yeah. Flocks of flying fugu come in winter. Loads of them... And there are less of us every year. Some of the guns don’t work anymore. I don’t even know if we’ll make it through this year...”

The flying fugu were a terrifying evolved species of flying fish that filled their bodies with gases, allowing them to float in the air. Their cute exterior belied a powerful jaw that could close with enough force to crush bone.

“...If only the grown-ups were here. If only they came back. Then, we could... We could... Ouch!”

In her frustration, Plum slipped and nicked her finger with the knife. Milo dashed to her side and took her hand. He took some jellyfish oil from his pocket and rubbed it on the wound. Just then, at the base of Plum’s fingers, Milo spotted a gray dryness and cracked skin.

“Th-thank you...”

Plum shyly looked up at Milo and met his eyes. His look was grave, with no trace of the mild-mannered doctor from before. As the girl stared deeply into those azure stars, her cheeks burned crimson.

“I-I-I-I’m okay... Y-you can let go now...”

“Your skin,” Milo whispered, still holding on to the girl’s hand. “On your fingers. That’s shellskin disease. Have you had it long?”

“...Huh?!”

Plum’s breath caught in her throat. She was unsure where to begin, but in her heart she already trusted the man before her completely, and there was no way she could stop the words from forming.

“I... I’ve had it...as long as I can remember. And it’s not just me; most of the kids here have it... This disease, it’s called the Rust, isn’t it? The grown-ups wanted to cure us...but the medicine is really expensive. So they went to work in Imihama to pay for it. The governor there, Kurokawa... He made them wear

these weird masks...and then..."

Plum was fighting back tears to get the words out. Milo was normally kind and gentle, but now his eyes shook with anger like searing blue flames.

"...Kurokawa. He did this. To a bunch of children, no less...!"

Milo fished out his medicine case from his pocket and retrieved several vials. Then he wet a cloth with one and gently wiped it over the girl's cracked, gray skin. Astonishingly, it slowly returned to its former softness and color, before the girl's very eyes.

"A-amazing! H-how did you...?"

"Your disease is not the Rust," he said with a strange temperament that was neither kindness nor anger. "Anyone with a little medical knowledge can treat shellskin disease. Where are the others? Bring them here if you can. I'll cure all of them today."

Bisco was held atop Tetsujin's head, where Nuts's private quarters were located. His hands wrapped in chains, he poked his head through the bars of a cage made from Tetsujin's teeth and looked around the room.

"Pretty fancy for a kid's room," he said. "What the hell you got a prison cell in here for anyway?"

"Silence, prisoner!" shouted Nuts. "You want me to blow off some of your toes?"

"What're those harpoons on the walls?" said Bisco, ignoring his threat. "Those are some pretty fine weapons."

A sharp pair of crossed harpoons hung on the far wall, their metallic sheen glinting in the sunlight. Nuts was about to lose his temper with Bisco, when he stopped for a moment and quietly began to answer.

"...They were my dad's. He used to be the head of this village. He fought against the Imihama army, and they blew him to pieces. I've kept them all this time, so that I don't ever forget what they did to him."

Nuts's voice wavered, and Bisco could feel the emotion starting to come through in his voice.

“I clean them, polish them, keep them free of rust. As long as they shine, so does my hatred...”

By the end, Nuts’s voice was barely a whisper, trembling with rage and regret, forced through gritted teeth. Kousuke looked on at his leader in solemn silence, while beside him, Bisco smiled a wicked grin, flashing his pearly canines.

“Well, sob story aside, they’re nice weapons. Give ’em to me.”

“...Wh-what?!”

“Give ’em to me. I mean, what’re they gonna do up there on the wall? Might as well get some use out of ’em, don’cha think? And let’s be honest, they’re a bit too big for you.”

“Y-you... you jerk!”

Nuts’s hair bristled with rage as he raised his rifle and pointed it at Bisco. Just then, there came a joyful voice from downstairs.

“Nuts! Nuuuts!”

As Nuts turned to look at the source, a bunch of children came flooding into the room, pushing the furniture aside.

“Wh-what are you all doing here? Why aren’t you keeping an eye on the panda?!”

“That’s just it, Nuts! Look at this! My arm’s all better! I can move it again! Look, my ears and foot, too!”

“And my eyes! I can see much better now, Nuts! I can go on watchtower duty again! I bet I’ll be even better than before!”

“Wh-what happened...?! ”

Nuts was faced with a crowd of children, all yelling over one another about how their disease was somehow cured. And sure enough, it seemed they were telling the truth. Their dry, pale skin had become warm and healthy once again.

“It was that panda! He’s like the Buddha! He’s like Jesus! He used some magic medicine on us, and it went away in a flash! Hey, Nuts, you should go, too; I bet he can do yours as well!”

“You what...?! Don’t be stupid! He’s playing tricks on you, can’t you see? I’ll go sort him out; take me to him!”

Nuts barked commands at the children and headed down the stairs. When Kousuke started to follow after him, Nuts shouted, “Kousuke, you stay here and keep an eye on Akaboshi. We don’t know what he’s going to try!” before running off.

“Whaaat? By myself? You’re so mean, Nuts!”

There was no reply. Kousuke hung his head dejectedly. For a while, he milled around the room with nothing to do, until eventually he took out a scrap of paper from his pocket, unrolled it, and gazed at it in wonder.

“...Is that a railroad map?” said Bisco, and Kousuke jumped.

“Y-y-you can tell just by looking?”

“Kinda. Jabi and I... My master and I used one to get around a checkpoint once. An underground railway. Went from Nara to Mie... The Keikyu–Benibashi Line, I think they called it.”

“Y-you used one of the abandoned railways?! A-a-amazing!”

Kousuke shiftily stole a glance down the staircase to make sure no one was coming, then excitedly shuffled up closer to Bisco.

“Hey, mister. You’re really a Mushroom Keeper, aren’t you? That’s so cool; I bet you’ve been to loads of places...”

“Hey, you’re quite different from that turban snail kid, ain’t ya? Not afraid of Mushroom Keepers?”

“M-m-my dad said that once when I was sick...a Mushroom Keeper saved my life. S-so he...really liked them...” Kousuke rubbed the freckles by his nose. “S-so...I always wanted to talk to a Mushroom Keeper...’c-cause...you saved my life. Wh-wh-where were you going anyway, mister?”

“Up north, to Akita,” said Bisco. “There’s a mushroom there I’ve gotta find. I was on my way to get it when Actagawa...my crab, he ran out of food. That’s why we stopped here.”

“In that case...!” Kousuke’s face lit up. “T-t-take this map with you! M-m-my

dad used to look at it...and say we'd all take a trip north one day. A-all the railway lines up there are on it! I-i-it's really old, so maybe some of them aren't open anymore...b-but I bet there are still trains you can use!"

"Listen, kid. I'm supposed to be your prisoner. I don't think you're cut out for this job," said Bisco as the map was forced into his hands. Then he reluctantly put it in his pocket and turned back toward the annoyingly innocent child before him. "You shouldn't be so trusting all the time. When I was your age, I thought ninety percent of everything people told me was a lie."

"I-it's okay! I've read it so many times already that I know it all by heart!"

Bisco wasn't sure that addressed his concerns, but Kousuke simply adjusted his pond snail hat and looked at Bisco with sparkling eyes.

"M-m-my dad always said...he wanted to pay back the Mushroom Keepers for what they did. H-he's dead now, b-b-but I can do it in his place!"

As Kousuke was talking, he suddenly seemed to remember something and rushed upstairs to the rooftop. Bisco called out to him in concern.

"Hey! Aren't you supposed to be keeping an eye on me? Your leader's gonna kick your ass if he finds out!"

"I—I just need to go pee-pee!"

Bisco flashed a toothy grin and sat down in resignation. Then he pulled out the crumpled map from his pocket and chuckled to himself as he looked at it.

"Giving a map to a guy in a jail cell. What are you tryin' to make me do, kid?"

In a way, that was what made him so endearing, Bisco thought as he slowly tensed his arm muscles and pulled at his bound wrists.

"Wh-what the heck did you do...?"

His shark mask removed, Nuts placed his fingers to his lips and felt the once-soft skin around his mouth restored. He looked repeatedly in the mirror like he didn't believe what he was witnessing.

"The medicine Imihama sold you was a scam. You never needed it." Milo's calm words barely concealed his rage. He reached into his bags and pulled out several vials of yellow medicine. Then he took out a piece of paper, scrawled

something on it, beckoned Plum over, and put it in her hand.

“Come here, Plum,” he said. “This is the medicine that cures shellskin disease. Don’t be shy about using it, especially on the kids who have it the worst. Just keep applying it until the skin is all cleared up. This should be enough for quite a while, but just in case, I’m giving you the recipe as well. The ingredients should all be things you can find around here. Just be careful when going outside the village, okay?”

“Are you an angel, mister?” said Plum. “You cured everyone in the village... Just like magic...”

“Hey, Nuts,” said one boy. “We gotta do something to pay this guy back. The Calvero fishermen prize duty above all. Isn’t that what the grown-ups used to say?”

“That’s right!” said a girl. “If he hadn’t been here, eventually we’d have gone all hard and died! We have to show our thanks somehow!”

“...”

Frowning, Nuts listened to the voices around him with his arms crossed, eventually caving to the pressure and responding.

“...Do we even have anything he wants? There’s nothing of value here.”

“There is, actually,” said Milo. “One thing.” His cerulean eyes gave a sly glimmer. “My partner, Bisco Akaboshi. Let him go and hand him over to me.”

“!!”

“Ah!”

“Of course!”

“Akaboshi...!”

At this, the children with the seashell hats all turned to one another and clamored among themselves. It seemed that up until now they had fully forgotten that the nice doctor man had been an accomplice to the villain Akaboshi. But as they talked, it became clear that the children had quite taken to Milo, and the majority were receptive to his request. “Well, as long as he stays quiet...” “He did save us, after all...” And so on.

Plum approached Nuts, who was still standing, arms folded. “Come on,” she said.

“No.”

“Come on, Nuts!”

“We’re not handing over Akaboshi! Ask for something else, Panda!”

H-huh? I thought that would work. Did I have the wrong read on him? thought Milo. A cold sweat broke out on his face as his trust in the child’s innate goodness proved to be misplaced. He could tell that behind the kid’s tough exterior, a part of him truly wanted to pay Milo back, but some other obligation was nagging at him and closing off his heart.

“Come on, Nuts! Akaboshi is this doctor’s companion!” said Plum. “He can’t be such a bad guy! He’s his friend! Let him go!”

But Nuts shot back, shaking his head wildly. “It’s not about that; it’s about the money! Eight hundred thousand sols, we’re talkin’! We could buy new weapons for the whole town. Our guns are nearly all rusted, and we ain’t got much ammo left, neither. If nothing changes before winter, the flying fugu’ll come and eat everyone in the village! You okay with that?”

Nuts’s sharp rebuke sent the other boys into silence. It wasn’t as if he was any less sympathetic than the other kids, but the desire to save his village compelled him to make these tough decisions.

Nuts turned and walked away. “If we’re done here, I’m leaving. Your crab’s been well fed, so it’s about time you left,” he said without looking back. Milo scratched his lip with his fingernail, pondering his next move.

Just as Nuts stepped onto the stairs, a voice rang out from above.

“Fugu! The fugu are here!”

“Huh?! Kousuke? Where are you?”

The boy’s scream echoed through the whole village and sent the children into a panic. Nuts rushed up the staircase out of the kitchen and into the town’s central plaza that jutted out of Tetsujin’s chest. Looking to the sky, he spotted a single flying fugu around the head of the giant, its body swelled up and its

mouth open as if to feed.

“What’s it doing here in the middle of summer?!” asked Nuts. “Did it get separated from the pack?”

As he aimed his rifle, Plum’s trembling voice reached his ears.

“I—I don’t think so. Nuts... Look at that... It’s even bigger than last year’s flock!”

He followed her gaze to see dozens of inflated fugu descending out of a low cloud toward the town. Whatever the cause, the village’s peace had quickly turned to turmoil, and now it lay on the verge of utter destruction.

“N-Nuts, there’s too many of them! We don’t got enough guns!”

“M-my gun won’t work! Dang it, why now?!”

Nuts heard his friends call out in despair, and he scowled. Normally, he could calm them down with a shout, but in this situation, that would be no different than asking them to wait to be eaten. As indecision racked his mind, he let out a quiet whine. “Arghhh, what should I dooooo...?”

“...There’s only one way you can save everybody.”

At the sound of this calm voice, Nuts and Plum turned to see Milo standing behind them. He wore a stern expression and looked directly into Nuts’s eyes.

“Wh-what way?” asked Nuts. “Tell me!”

“There’s a guy I know who eats creatures like this for breakfast. He’ll take care of them all in ten minutes flat.”

“Wh-who?! Where could we possibly find someone like that?!”

“Why, he’s locked up in your room,” said Milo. As Plum grew nervous, he stopped and flashed her a reassuring smile, before turning back to Nuts and taking a step toward him. “Nuts. You have to let Bisco go! He’s the only one who can save us! Or are you willing to sit back and watch your friends get eaten for eight hundred thousand sols?”

As Nuts wrestled with the choice before him, beads of sweat dripped down his face. Just then: *Crash!* There was a loud noise from above as one of the fugu

tore into the giant's iron head. As clouds of dust and rubble fell down on the town below, Nuts looked up to see a small figure being carried out between the beast's thick lips.

"Waaah! Nuuuts!"

Kousuke let out an earsplitting scream as the fish pinched him by the scruff of his jacket and hoisted him up into the air.

"Kousukeeee!" Nuts leveled his rifle, but fearful of hitting his friend, he was unable to bring himself to pull the trigger and closed his eyes. Just as Kousuke was about to become fish food, a red flash streaked across the clear-blue sky. Like a meteor, it struck the fish in midair and lifted some sort of spear in its hand before bringing it down between the fish's eyes. Then, with tremendous strength, it sliced the creature clean in two from head to tail.

That spear was one of Nuts's treasured harpoons.

"Bweeeehhh..."

The fish gave a dopey-sounding cry as its body deflated like a balloon. The red figure whisked Kousuke up onto its shoulders before kicking off, landing once more atop the iron giant's head.

"Turban snail. You know how to use this?" said Bisco, tossing the harpoon in his hand down to Nuts below and shooting him a friendly grin. "If it's your daddy's weapon, I expect he wants it back. So don't keep it preserved on your wall as a symbol of hate; wear it out and send it on after him."

"A-Akaboshi!" Nuts staggered as he caught the harpoon and looked up in shock. "B-but your chains! Your cage! How did you break free? I have the only key!"

"You need to come up with something better than *this* to keep me down." Bisco lifted his arms, revealing the broken chains dangling from his wrists. "That rusted-up cage was no better. I admit, it was fun to play along with you kids for a while, though."

"Wh-wh-what?!"

"Milo, my bow!"

Milo drew his gaze away from Nuts, who was clenching his teeth in anger. “Here!” he cried, tossing up Bisco’s emerald bow and a quiver of arrows. Bisco caught them, nocked an arrow, and drew his bow tight, his red hair flapping in the wind like a battle flag.

“Kousuke. Thanks for the map, but there’s something wrong with it.”

“H-huh? Th-th-that’s not possible!”

Bisco appeared a little lost for words. He ducked his head slightly to try to hide his embarrassment before answering, “...I actually can’t read super-well. So here’s the deal. My bow for your knowledge. Tell me each of the stations along the Tobu–Shirakaba line. For each one, you get one shot. Deal?”

“Wh-whaaat?!”

Bisco flashed a childish grin at the boy clinging to his neck for dear life.

“What’s wrong? Those fish are gonna eat your friends otherwise. Give ’em in order. You know ’em all by heart, right?”

“O-o-o-okay, fine! The Shirakaba line. The first station is...er...”

After witnessing the death of one of their number, the rest of the fugu flock singled out Bisco and descended upon him like piranhas.

“You better remember quick, ’cause they’re gonna eat us!”

“O-oh yeah! The first station is Kitsunezaka!”

“Kitsunezaka. Okay!”

Bisco’s arrow arced across the sky and lodged itself in one of the fugu. The creature twitched in the air, before a flood of little dark-gray mushrooms swarmed across its body with a *Gaboom! Gaboom!* and the fish immediately fell head over heels toward the ground. Bisco’s arrows were coated with the spores of the anchorshroom, a mushroom of incredible weight.

“Oh? Only one station? There’s a lot more fish, you know!”

“Err... The second one is...Kagamiboshi! The third...Tsueoki!”

Two more draws of Bisco’s bow sent another pair of fugu tumbling out of the sky.

“Hinariyama! Kamegoshi! Shougaiwa! Kabutobashi!”

With each new name, Bisco’s arrows launched one after the other. The terrifying swarm of killer fugu was steadily whittled down, until at last only a single fish remained.

“Last one, gimme a name!”

“O-oh, phew, just enough. It’s the final station: Konakidani, the Weeping Valley!”

At Kousuke’s shout, Bisco released his final arrow. As the last of the flying fugu crashed to the ground with a dull thud, the entire village erupted into cheers. As for Bisco himself, he simply cracked his neck in a rather bored fashion but then turned to the child on his back and gave him a cheeky smile.



“All right, Kousuke. Thanks for the lesson... Though, to be honest, I can just have Milo read it to me.”

“I-I-I’ll never forget this... N-not for my whole life! Y-y-you saved us, mister!”

Kousuke’s face was flush with emotion and excitement. Bisco looked him in the eye and said, “Just remember, next time a Mushroom Keeper shows up, asking for help, you help him, okay? Just like you did today. Fate has a funny way of coming around like that...or so my master told me.”

Kousuke couldn’t speak, he was so happy. He just nodded and disappeared down the iron giant’s throat. Bisco, meanwhile, took in the clear, dry air, letting the breeze tussle his scarlet hair. Then he leaped off the building and let out a yell.

“...Actagawaaa!”

As the children watched in astonishment and wonder, the giant crab sprang up to catch him, before landing with a roll on the shellsand below.

“Milo! We’re done here! Let’s get moving!”

“Okay!”

As Milo started to leave, he felt a tug at his sleeve. Turning around, he saw the sad face of Plum looking up at him, desperation in her eyes.

“Please don’t go... We need you. Everyone here thinks you’re really great... A-and so do I! Stay here and teach us about medicine, please...!”

Milo gave Plum a kind look and gently took her hand. “Plum. It’s not me this town needs; it’s you. Someone like you, with a kind heart, who thinks about other people instead of just about herself. That’s all you need to be a doctor.”

“At least tell me your name... Will we ever meet again?”

“It’s Milo. Milo Nekoyanagi,” he said, stroking Plum’s cheek with his finger. “And I don’t know, but I believe you’ll meet someone even better than me someday. Take care, Plum.”

Then, just like Bisco, Milo leaped off the iron giant and into the air, and Actagawa caught him, too. At last, the pair were back in their saddles.

“Phew! What a day, huh, Bisco? I never thought we’d find something to eat!”

“What did I tell you? When I do something, I do it right.”

“Nice one! And... Ha-ha! You’re so good with kids, Bisco! I knew it!”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I just treat ‘em like normal... I’m not especially nice to ‘em...”

“It was like out of a comic book! You know, a troublemaker with a heart of gold... *‘Just remember, next time a Mushroom Keeper shows up—’* Agh! Ow-ow-ow! I’m not trying to say anything bad!”

“Akaboshiii!”

Suddenly, a sharp spear hit the ground not far from where Actagawa was walking. It was one of the two harpoons from Nuts’s room. Bisco turned around to see an angry young boy standing there, scowling at him.

“Oh, hey there. Decided to give ‘em to me after all?” said Bisco.

“No, I was tryin’ to kill you, idiot!” Nuts’s loud voice echoed far over the shellsand plains. “I won’t forget how you humiliated me! I’m gonna capture you again one day, so stay alive until then!”

“...Why can’t you just say ‘Thanks for saving my village, Mr. Akaboshi’?”

Bisco went over to the harpoon and pulled it out of the sand. It looked rather tough, and its brilliant metal surface glimmered in the sunlight.

“What an obnoxious little kid. He’s gonna die young if he keeps that up.”

“Ha-ha, why can’t people just say what they’re feeling?”

“I know, right? ...Wait, who’re you talking about?”

Actagawa listened to the unusually boisterous conversation occurring above him. But his belly was full, and so he had no complaints as he scuttled off across the shellsand with his masters in tow.

“Hey, settle down, Actagawa! We have to wash you, or you’ll get barnacles!”

Bisco was fighting to keep Actagawa under control. He had already brushed all the sand off the crab’s shell, but once it came time to remove the creature’s saddle and bags, Actagawa suddenly began struggling with an uncharacteristic unruliness.

Unable to bear the sight any longer, Milo descended from the saddle.

“Let it go, Bisco. You’re being too forceful; you’re scaring him.”

“*I’m* scaring *him*?! This big guy?!”

Milo stroked the crab’s back gently, whispering “Good boy, good boy” into Actagawa’s ear. “It’s okay, Actagawa. We’re not trying to take anything from you. We just want to make sure you’re all nice and clean...”

Though it seemed unlikely that Actagawa would understand the meaning of Milo’s words, the doctor’s peaceful voice, like the still surface of a lake, caused Actagawa to grow quiet, before at last sitting himself down on the ground.

“There we go!” Milo beamed proudly.

“Hey...”

Bisco looked rather peeved as he unhooked the saddle. He had always left Actagawa’s handling to Jabi before now, so some teething issues were partly to be expected, but Bisco couldn’t get over how personable (or should that be crabbable?) Actagawa became in the presence of Milo, a newcomer, rather than himself, who was raised as the crab’s own brother.

“So...how do you do that? Is there, like, a trick, or something...?” Bisco asked as he scrubbed Actagawa’s saddle.

“Oh? What’s this? You’re awfully keen today, Bisco! Are you feeling okay?”

“Want me to break your nose?”

“There’s no tricks or anything! I think you’re fine just as you are, Bisco. Crabs aren’t like us humans, you see. They’re pure. So when you feel stressed, that makes Actagawa stressed out, too.”

“I’m stressed?”

“Sure, you are. You’re stressed about the Rust-Eater, Bisco. It’s all you ever think about.” Milo’s face was calm as he gently stroked Actagawa’s shell. “Actagawa knows you’re a nice person. But now, you’re like...a sword removed from its sheath. He’s scared to touch you. You’re like a different person to him now.”

“He’s scared of...me?”

“And if you keep a sword outside of its sheath too long...it rusts,” said Milo as he sat down and leaned against Actagawa’s belly. “I know how strong you are, and I know you’re running out of time. That’s why now, more than ever, I don’t want you to be alone... I may still be weak, but I can help shoulder your burdens. Just like I’m sure Jabi was doing...back before we met.”

“ ...”

“...We’re partners. So trust me. We can stay positive together. And then, I bet Actagawa won’t be so scared of you anymore.”

“...Okay.”

“Wow! You’re actually listening to me? Are you sure you’re feeling okay, Bisco? Here, let me touch your forehead!”

“Shut up! Get off me!”

After reattaching Actagawa’s saddle, Bisco stormed off in the direction of the camp. As Milo watched him go, he chuckled softly to himself.

Bisco was a peerless bowman, a wild dog of a man. But every time he showed his true self it was like a nick in his armor, through which Milo could see that the two of them were not so very different after all. It was a somewhat worrying yet also strangely comforting feeling. Milo felt that emotion now once more, and after giving one last look back at Actagawa, who was now completely

calm again, he jogged off toward the camp, following after his partner.

The two humans and one crab had set up camp in the ruins of a fallen watchtower they had encountered during the day. The tower's skeleton did little to protect them from the Rust Wind, which had already completely eroded its reinforced glass, but it at least provided them with ground that was above water level.

"Here we are! Fugu liver and mushroom soup!"

Bisco had left their unexpected catch in the capable hands of Milo, who had done an excellent job at turning it into dinner. The translucent, white broth gave off a rich aroma as it simmered over the open flame, and Bisco found his mouth watering. He dished out a spoonful of broth into his own bowl and took a sip.

"Whoa, what the hell did you put in this?! It's fuckin' good!"

"Hey, mind your manners when eating!"

Bisco immediately spooned up another bowlful and slurped down the whole thing with childlike abandon. As much as it pleased Milo to see Bisco enjoying the food he had made, he soon started to worry there would be none left for him and hurriedly started dishing up his own share, fighting against Bisco for control of the soup.

At night, the scenery of the Shellsand Sea took on a very different atmosphere. The night sky met its reflection in the water, the constellations above inscribed on the surface below. As the two sat there full of fugu meat, it felt as though they were surrounded by stars on all sides, drifting untethered through outer space. The only sound to break the silence was Actagawa noisily scarfing down the leftovers.

"...Soon we'll be out of this godforsaken place. I'm okay; I got my bow to protect me against any monsters that show up, but I bet you're ready to leave this salt and hunger behind."

"No, not at all! I'd never been outside the walls until now," said Milo. Then he sighed deeply and continued. "I never even thought about what the world outside was like... I didn't know there were huge creatures like that, nature, the

ruins of civilization... I always thought if I went outside, the first gust of wind would blow me over..."

"Heh, it's not that bad. Well, don't worry, once we save your sister, you can go right back to your city life, and—"

"No, Bisco!" Milo sat up in the darkness and placed his hand on Bisco's knee. "That's...not what I mean. It was fun. It was...really beautiful! The landscape, the air and the water, even that huge shrimp temple... How can I describe it? It's like... I saw the power of life for the first time. Things struggling to survive. It's not like Imihama at all, where the streets are stale, and the weak are picked on by the strong..."

"...Milo..."

"I was blind in those streets, Bisco... What was I seeing all that time? While I was safe in the walls, those children were out here fighting for survival, and Governor Kurokawa bled them for all they had."

"Heh, you're thinking about it the wrong way. You were a doctor, weren't you? You did what you could. Everyone has their limits, and you can only push yourself so far beyond."

"...Heh... Heh-heh... Ah-ha-ha-ha! I never thought I'd hear that from *you*, Bisco!"

Milo's expression brightened up in a flash, and he burst out laughing. Bisco wasn't sure what his partner found so funny and tilted his head a little in the dark.

"Well, in any case, we're not even halfway yet. And soon you won't be calling it beautiful anymore. Next up is Shimobuki. We'll have to start thinking about how to keep the cold off, or we'll freeze to death."

"Bisco, from what I saw of it earlier, Kousuke's map seems like the real deal. We might actually be able to find working trains on the Shirakaba line. If we come across a station, that would be an amazing shortcut!"

"Yeah... I wanna believe it, but it's just a kid's story. I'm worried that if we take it too seriously, we could end up wastin' a lot of time. We'll keep an eye out, but we're not going out of our way to look for them. I don't wanna take

any unnecessary risks. I just wanna put as much effort as I can into it. As much as I can take...”

After a lengthy silence, Milo asked a question.

“...Bisco, about Jabi...? Is he your teacher or your father?”

In the dark of night, Milo couldn't see Bisco's expression. Bisco paused, as if asking himself that very question, before responding.

“...I dunno. He's both, I guess. He's just Jabi.”

All Milo could see was the starlight reflected in Bisco's emerald eyes.

“He taught me all sorts of stuff... How to use a bow, how to survive. I know he looks like your average, senile old coot, but back in the day, he was strict. I thought I was gonna die back then.”

“What? Because of Jabi?”

“Hard to believe, right?” Bisco laughed. “Yeah, he really put me through hell. I always dreamed of getting stronger than him and beating the shit out of him one day, but I don't feel that way anymore. He's just a cowardly old man, and if I ever get stronger than him, I'm sure I'll get the ‘my work here is done’ spiel.”

Bisco paused for a minute, looking up at the indigo sky. Milo felt as if his words had cut so close to Bisco's heart that he could feel it beating.

“Hey, Bisco... I think... I think Jabi really loves y— *Ouch!*” A shadow reached through the darkness and flicked Milo painfully on the forehead.

“Enough sappy talk.” Bisco grinned at Milo's squirming form. “Well, he might be a crazy old fart, but he's *my* crazy old fart.”

There was a short silence.

“I wanna save him.”

Milo was struck by how quiet and calm Bisco sounded. He was always focused so intently on his goal, burning with such determination that it was difficult to be near him. This was the first time Milo felt like he had been able to get close. He almost didn't want to speak, for fear of spoiling the moment, but he just had to offer his partner some encouraging words.

“We will, Bisco. We’ll save him. You’re the Mushroom Keepers’ shining star, and I’m Dr. Nekoyanagi. Together, we can do anything...!”

“Heh. Now who’s the one talking weirdly?” Bisco regained his usually cheeky smile and chuckled. He turned to Milo in the night, staring at him fixedly with those bright-green eyes.

“Of course we can. We’ll save ’em both. Jabi—and your big sis, too.”

“Bisco...”

“Now get to bed. We have another early morning tomorrow.”

Then Bisco rolled over, pulling his cloak over himself without another word. Milo gazed up at the stars but found himself unable to fall asleep, so he just lay there watching Bisco’s sleeping form.

For most people nowadays, who were born and lived their entire lives within the walls of a single city, Imihama was considered the northernmost point of human civilization, and many had little regard for what happened beyond that. To them, the northern prefectures like Iwate were largely uncharted territory beside famous spots like Manreiji Temple. In addition to the ordeals of crossing the Shellsand Sea, the Kusahime swamp, and the Orochi Forest trail, the prefecture of Shimobuki itself presented a significant obstacle.

It was formed over what was once called Fukushima, where a facility was established to conduct catalytic ice experiments with the aim of counteracting the Rust Wind. Only three days after starting up, the facility suffered a critical failure that blanketed the entire southern half of the land in unmelting ice and snow.

The surrounding prefectures left it well alone and didn't even bother to set up checkpoints on its borders. In fact, there wasn't even any sort of ruling government there in the first place. However, the place saw frequent blizzards even in the summer, and in a strange sort of irony, that seemed to keep the Rust Wind at bay. Thus, there were inhabitants there who sought to eke out a living amid the frozen land.

"Noo. Tiktok impoz. Sols, Nadoo."

"Sols, nadoora?"

"Nadoo."

A cart was stopped in the blizzard. At its front, a furry two-headed cow blithely licked the snow off its face with one of its dark-red tongues, while making a sort of *brrr* sound. In front of the cart, Milo was speaking with a trader in the Shimobuki language. At last he turned to Bisco, who was holding a stack of sols in his hand, and shrugged.

“He says he doesn’t take sols. He wants wine and canned food from before the Tokyo Disaster—and blankets and stuff.”

“Who does he think we are, junk traders? We ain’t got nothin’ like that.”

Then Bisco turned away, so Milo couldn’t see the respect in his eyes, and continued.

“But I didn’t know you could speak Shimobuki. Just sounds like bear growls to me.”

“Some Shimobuki people showed up at the clinic from time to time. I learned quite a bit just from listening to them speak.”

“Huh... That’s pretty cool.”

“Also, we learned some at school.”

“You just had to go and say that, didn’t you?!”

The merchant Milo was talking to was dressed head to toe in a chubby, rounded suit, and even his face was covered in a bowl, over which he wore a thick, furry cowskin hood. He resembled some kind of astronaut, and to the outside observer, there was something strangely cute about his appearance. What was not cute, however, was the tightfisted manner with which he conducted business.

“Crab, tik. Crab, meetik. Kat, yootok.”

“What? No!”

“Hey, what’s he saying?”

“He’s saying he wants...Actagawa. And he’ll give us his cart in return.”

“What a dick,” muttered Bisco. Frustrated by the lack of progress, he started to rummage around in Actagawa’s saddlebags. Then he took out several large loads of his precious giant eel jerky and dumped them on the floor at the merchant’s feet.

“Here’s all the meat we’ve hunted on our journey so far. All of it! If you won’t take this, then we ain’t got no more business with you.”

The merchant was completely unperturbed by Bisco’s bluster, but he set

about examining the wares nonetheless. After a short while, he stood up and nodded.

“Yadoo,” he said, before turning to his cart and sifting through his wares.

“Really? Thank you!” exclaimed Milo.

“Save your thanks,” Bisco cautioned. “That was our last food. We’re gonna have to hunt more.”

After changing into their new bearskin cloaks, the group headed north. Bisco had never much cared for the cold and wasn’t planning on staying there too long. While he let Actagawa handle the walking, he peered at Kousuke’s map suspiciously.

“There should be a station here somewhere. It’s the Tobu–Shirakaba line, right? ...Dammit, there’s nothin’ but snow everywhere...” Bisco narrowed his eyes, prodding the map with his finger. “We’ll save a couple days if we can get it workin’. Aren’t there any landmarks around?”

Bisco looked to his side to see Milo aiming a bow far out over the snowfield. He struck quite the gallant image, and his form wasn’t half bad. Far out in the distance, a single small rabbit hopped across the snow. As it stopped to examine the ground, there was a whistle of air as Milo released his arrow. It arced gently through the air...and hit the snow slightly off target.

“Heh-heh-heh! Close, Dr. Panda, but no cigar!” Bisco seemed amused and prodded Milo’s rib. “You’re focusin’ too much on the wind. Listen here, in a snowstorm like this, you gotta...”

Just as Bisco was about to launch into a lecture on the finer points of bowmanship, there was a soft burst as Milo’s arrow launched some sort of white cotton into the air. The material descended on the rabbit as it tried to make its escape, tangling it up until it fell to the ground, immobile.

“I used the mixing device to add some steelspider silk to the boomshrooms,” said Milo as Bisco looked on, dumbfounded. Then he burst into a smile. “You see, Bisco? I don’t have to hit my target for things to work out!”

“That doesn’t count!”

“Whaaat? Why not?!”

Milo had been a greenhorn when he first left Imihama, but the exceptional growth he had shown in the time since then surprised even Bisco. His skill with drugs and potions was to be expected, but he had also shown great ingenuity when the pair was attacked by steelspiders in the Orochi Forest. Milo successfully fought them off by using his medicine device to send an electric current through the spiderwebs. When they ran into a herd of killer dragonflies as big as a human, he stood side by side with Bisco without even flinching and shot the insects out of the sky.

The courage that Bisco was fostering in the young doctor, along with the genius and quick wit he already possessed, meant that Milo was very rapidly showing signs of becoming a top Mushroom Keeper.

...Hmm, well, it is an impressive mixture..., thought Bisco as he descended from his crab and walked over to where the rabbit, wrapped up in steelspider silk, wriggled helplessly on the ground. He grabbed it by the ears and hoisted it up. It was unexpectedly heavy, and looking down, Bisco saw something else hanging from his arm, half sticking out of the snow.

“Gnyaaagh!”

A familiar head of pink hair. It was the jellyfish from the Driftweed Plains. The small-statured merchant girl.

“Aaah! It’s her!”

A pair of amber eyes glared bitterly back at the two shocked boys. Her hair was frozen on end, and as she shivered, snow fell from it in clumps. One landed directly on the girl’s small nose, and she let out a great big sneeze.

“Oh no, she’s frozen solid! H-how did she end up buried under all this snow?!”

“Let me guess, she was running from a snow leopard and decided to hide under the snow. Their noses ain’t so great, ya see. Then the leopard happened to stick around for a while, and she never had the chance to leave.”

“B-Bisco! How long are you going to hold her upside down? Put her down—No, don’t shake her!”

As much as he wanted to be getting on his way, Bisco couldn't just leave the girl to freeze to death in the snow. Reluctantly tucking the ice sculpture under his arm, he got back on Actagawa and set about looking for a cave or something where they could escape the blizzard and thaw her out.

"Grr... What the hell are we even doing? I swear, this girl must be cursed," said Bisco.

"It must be fate," said Milo. "Another ten minutes out there, and she'd have been in real trouble."

In a shallow cave, Milo broke a few bonecoal heating pads and stuffed them into the girl's clothing. The orange glow gently warmed her body back up until she was aware of her surroundings once more. Seeing Bisco standing in front of her, eyeing her closely, she gave a small "Hmph!" and turned away from him.

"...You two again? Your lives must be very boring if... Ah-*choo*! ...If you have to keep meddling in mine."

"You're welcome, sunshine," said Bisco. "It'd hardly kill ya to show some gratitude. We *did* just save your life, y'know."

"How are you feeling?" Milo asked. "Here, this is firemead. Drink it slowly... There we go; that'll warm you up... Hey, how did you manage to get here before us? We were going as fast as we could."

Faced with Milo's earnest gaze, the girl dropped her usual games and simply nodded far out over the fields. There, at the base of a pillar of black smoke, lay the burned-out wreckage of a military helicopter.

"I fixed up one of the choppers stuck to that hermit crab temple. Then I decided to head to Miyagi, but— *Achoo!*" The girl sneezed and sniffled again before continuing. "I ran into the antiaircraft guns at Shimobuki Garrison, and well, you can imagine what happened next. All my things went up in the blaze, too. Dang it; this is so lame."

"Serves you right for rippin' people off your whole life," said Bisco. "What goes around comes around."

"Well, what else was I supposed to do?" Her usually sly expression was nowhere to be found. Now her amber eyes glared right at Bisco with a fierce

intensity. "I did what I could to survive. Yeah, I tricked people. I did things I'm not proud of, things you two boys couldn't even imagine! I didn't do all of that because I wanted to! I did it because I had no other choice...!"

Her voice shook. She was nothing like the coy troublemaker they had met before. Bisco lowered the comebacks he had at the ready and just watched the top of her pink head. Milo approached and silently awaited the girl's next words.

"...But I'm fed up with all that. I don't want to keep doing this. I just get tangled up in this web of lies that drags me down... It's so lame! And I've had enough. You shouldn't have bothered saving me. It would have been a fitting end."

The small girl trembled in the cold of the cave. As Milo offered her his cloak, Bisco slowly approached...and touched the scalding tip of his bonecoal heater to the nape of her neck!

"Owwwww!" The girl leaped into the air, sending her braids flying. As Milo stood there in shock, Bisco hid behind him, and the jellyfish girl chased him around and around, yelling at him in anger.

"Are you trying to kill me, you idiot?! Is that any way to treat a lady?!"

"Heh, looks like you still got some life in ya." Bisco laughed. "I thought you musta been possessed by somethin' again, 'cause I remember how you clung to me screamin' you didn't wanna die not too long ago."

Bisco's words stunned the jellyfish girl, and she turned bright red remembering her pitiable state. Snatching the heater from Bisco's palm, the short girl glared up at him with disgust.

"Hmph! I just wanted Panda Boy to look after me! You can get lost!"

This wounded Bisco, who reeled in surprise. Then Milo spoke up. "In that case," he said, and he smiled at Bisco before walking over to Actagawa, unfastening one of his saddlebags, and bringing it before the girl.

"We don't have a lot, either, but there's food and cold-weather gear in here. If you take it south, there's a trading post not far from here. You'll be able to trade it for what you need there."

The girl's eyes went wide, and as she hurriedly searched for her purse, Milo smiled.

"We don't need money, just simple human kindness! You told us that, remember?"

With all affairs thus settled, Milo turned to Bisco, who nodded, and walked out into the snow toward Actagawa. As he did, a scrap of old paper fell out of his pocket and onto the soft white snow.

"...Hold up, Akaboshi, ya dropped something!"

Bisco turned to see the jellyfish girl steadily making her way through the snow, and she stopped and picked up the snow-covered paper. She took one glance at it before stuffing it back in Bisco's hand.

"That's...a Shirakaba railroad map, ain't it? You tryna take the trains north?"

"We were, yeah. But we ain't got time to look for the station no more. I think we're just gonna go by foot—"

"I know where it is."

"...Huh?"

"You got snow in yer ears? I'm sayin' I know where the station is!" The girl shyly averted her gaze as the two boys stared in shock. "And let me just tell ya, you won't last five minutes out in this blizzard on a crab! ...I got no choice, huh? I'd hate to see y'all die out here..." She twirled a braid in her finger. "I-if ya want, I can show ya the way... If y'all still trust me, that is..."

The girl led them about a kilometer away to a snow-covered road that, at first glance, was completely empty. Using Actagawa to break the thick ice that covered the ground, they came across a stone staircase stretching far down into the darkness below.

"This is Kitsunezaka," she said. "Apparently, this used to be a popular location for traveling merchants, and they came here all the time."

"So you ain't never been yourself?" asked Bisco. "Didn't your friends make loads of money here?"

"Who knows? I didn't ask. Maybe we'll find their skeletons down there."

The two looked at her before heading into the darkness. Though the space underground was safe from the raging blizzard, the air still had a cold bite that chilled them to the bone. It was damp and humid down there and had a sort of grassy, mossy smell.

“It’s too dark for Actagawa. He’ll get scared,” said Milo.

“Hmm, we shouldn’t make too much light, but...”

From his pocket, Bisco took a bag containing a fine, yellow powder and put a little in his mouth, before tilting his head up toward the ceiling and exhaling. Soon, a bunch of small mushrooms appeared all along the roof of the cavern, emitting a soft, orange glow.

“Wow, it’s so pretty!” said Milo.

The light illuminated the station platform. The ground was smashed up in places, and yellowing timetables hung from crooked pillars, but on the whole, the place was in surprisingly good shape.

“These are glowshrooms. They won’t give off much light, though.”

Bisco repeated his actions a couple more times before spitting out the dust left in his mouth in disgust.

“Those spores stick to the walls,” Milo said. “Is it safe to put them in your mouth?”

“Don’t worry; there’s a trick to it. Remember who you’re dealing with; he —*erk*.”

Bisco suddenly started coughing violently, and several of the glowing mushrooms fell out of his mouth and onto the ground with a wet splat.

“They grew,” Milo observed.

“Let’s keep moving.”

“You didn’t do the trick, did you, Bisco?”

“Shaddap already! Are you comin’ or not?!”

As Milo smiled, he beckoned Actagawa down the stairs and onto the station platform. The jellyfish girl followed, carefully sticking by the crab’s side before

jogging over to rejoin the other two.

“Whoa, they’re glowing...! You guys’s mushrooms can do anything!”

“Nah, not everything. This here’s the best I can do,” said Bisco, lowering his goggles. “All Mushroom Keepers have their own specialties. Like Jabi, for example. The Jizou mushroom is one of his masterpieces; that’s for sure.”

“Jizou mushroom? What kind of mushroom is that?”

“Well, it’s in the name. It grows into a huge Jizou statue. The stonework is just...incredible. And the facial expression is slightly different every time. It’s amazing; everyone loves it...”

“W-wow... But what do you use it for?”

“Huh?” Bisco was taken aback by the unexpected question. He thought it over before responding, as he listened for anyone else who might have been hiding down there in the subway.

“Well...you can pray to it at Obon and stuff... You can have your own portable statue; it’s pretty handy.”

Then Bisco stood up as if to stop any further questions and set off farther on, leaving Milo and the jellyfish girl behind.

“I can’t tell if these Mushroom Keepers are supposed to be smarter than us or stupider...,” she said.

“Ha-ha-ha! You’re right. I think going by Jabi and Bisco, it’s a little of both.”

“...Panda Boy, I’ve been thinking...,” said the jellyfish girl, looking down at the ground. “Akaboshi’s old man don’t got much time left, right? And your sister’s bound to die if the Rust catches up to her... So why d’ya do it? Why do you put yer life on the line for somebody else?”

“Why?” repeated Milo. He wasn’t quite prepared for that question and pondered it a little before answering.

“...Because I love her. And I think Bisco loves Jabi, too. That’s the first reason. And the second is...” He hesitated over the words, blushing slightly. “...because we’re idiots, I think! Both of us!”

Laughing, Milo took the girl's hand and followed after Bisco, who was busy lighting the path ahead with his glowshrooms.

"You got that right," said the girl. "Dumbest idiots I ever met..."

"...Wow! Bisco, look at all the trains!"

Following a vast railroad perhaps seven or eight rails wide, the group came at last to a veritable graveyard of trains. Some huge earthquake or other disaster had left the train cars lying in broken heaps or crashed into one another, like the giant toys of a petulant baby.

"Xinghao, Juntong, Zhenfeng... These are all Huabei Ironworks trains," Milo muttered to himself as he read the markings on the sides. "They should be able to run on their own, if we can find one that still works..."

"Hey, Milo!" Bisco's voice echoed through the vast tunnel. "This is the right track according to Kousuke's map. You think this train could work?"

Milo ran over in the direction of the voice and found a drab freight train with relatively little damage sitting neatly on the tracks.

"Wow, this one might work! Let's give it a try! Hmm... Let's see... First, move the control stick into the following position... Like this? Then change the sign to read IN SERVICE. Insert three hundred yen into the slot and press the red button..."

"It ain't cheap, is it? Oh well, guess I gotta..." Bisco fished into his pockets, then shot back, "Wait, *yen*? I ain't got any yen! Who's carryin' old coins around?"

"Argh! Get out the way, you two! I can't watch this anymore!"

The jellyfish girl hopped aboard the train, her bright-pink hair her most conspicuous feature in the gloom. Pushing the boys aside, she took a crowbar out of her pocket and bashed the lid of the fare box in with all her might. After removing the dented cover, she took a look inside.

"Oh dear. Pretty simple design. 'If it works, it works' kinda deal. Welp, that just makes things easier for me."

"Wait, you know how old machines like this work? Are you really *just* a merchant?" asked Milo.

“I’m a merchant, yeah. Before that, though, I was a mechanic.”

The girl swiftly cut the wires inside the box, unrolled a length of black insulation tape with her teeth, and wrapped it around the new wiring. All the boys could do was stare at each other in amazement at her skillful and beautiful handiwork.

“You’re a real pro...!” marveled Bisco. “Did you work for a company or something?”

“...They worked me to the bone. But meh, the pay wasn’t bad. Then one day they dig up Tetsujin and ask me to work on it...”

“Tetsujin? You mean...the same Tetsujin that blew up Tokyo? *That* Tetsujin?”

The jellyfish girl simply nodded without turning away from her work.

“I guess so. Dunno if it was the real one or not, but they asked if I could get it workin’ again. Wonder if the supreme Matoba Ironworks had some prefecture or somethin’ they didn’t like the look of? It all seemed pretty sketchy to me, but they were dead set on it. Then, one by one, the Rust killed off all the workers, and I went from bein’ the lowest grease monkey to runnin’ the whole shebang. That was when I hightailed it outta there in one of them Escargot Planes... That’s a long time ago now, though.”

The girl finished her work and stretched, her face covered in soot. Then she tried once more to put the control stick into position, while giving the fare box a good kick.

Brrrrrrr!

The entire carriage shook and emitted a deep rumble as its stores of bonecoal fuel ignited.

“I-it worked! Hooray! Bisco!”

“Actagawa! Get over here! We’re gonna ride this thing all the way to Akita!”

Actagawa, who had been curiously poking at the strange, unfamiliar trains, jumped at his master’s voice and scuttled over. As the carriage steadily picked up speed, Actagawa leaped aboard, landing snugly in a large luggage rack. Milo slipped past Bisco, who looked very pleased, and grabbed on to the slender arm

of the girl who was about to step off the train.

“...Hey. I want to thank you, but...I still don’t know your name,” he said as the girl looked back at him with wide eyes. “I’m Milo. Milo Nekoyanagi. The scary guy over there is Bisco Akaboshi. I think we’d both be done for if you hadn’t saved us. Would you tell us your name?”

“J-just call me Jellyfish. I don’t wanna tell ya my name; you’ll laugh at me...”

“No, we won’t! We have weird names, too, it’s okay!”

Powerless against Milo’s twinkling eyes, the jellyfish girl dipped her head in silence before looking up at him and replying, “It’s T... Tirol... Tirol Ochagama. N-nobody’s said my name in such a long time, b-but since ya wanted to know, Panda Boy... I mean, Milo...”

“Thanks, Tirol. You really saved our hides.” At Bisco’s words, Tirol gave a small start and turned toward him. “Seems like we’re bound by fate, so it’s best we know your name. That way, we know what to write on your tombstone when you kick the bucket.”

“As if! You guys’re gonna die way before me. And when I find yer bodies, I’m gonna bury them upside down!”

As Tirol jumped off onto the platform, Milo called out, “Tirol, we’ll meet again, I’m sure of it! We’ll be talking about you, wondering what our friend is getting up to! So stay safe, and we’ll catch up! Thank you, Tirol, for everything!”

“...Friend...?”

As she watched Milo and Bisco disappear into the distance, she took a single step forward, like a woman possessed, and shouted with a volume that surprised even herself.

“Akaboshiii! Milooo! Th...thank...!”

“...Thank you...”

The two were already so far away that Tirol muttered her thanks only to herself, as if locking it deep away inside her memories. Then, at last, her amber eyes brimmed with brilliance once more, and she hoisted up her pack, gave one last look down the railroad, and hopped off the way she came like an eager

young rabbit.

“Scorched shrike... I don’t think this is quite right. Dryworm, giant woodpecker... These are a little off, too.”

“Whatcha readin’? Is that what you bought off the Shimobuki trader?”

Milo was turning the pages of an old, beat-up tome. For light, he had a rather large glowshroom growing out of the carcass of the rabbit he caught earlier with his spiderweb arrows.

“It’s supposed to be a field guide to the ecology of the Weeping Valley,” he said. “But take a look—all the pictures are drawn by hand, and the things written here are really vague... See, right here, next to *Height*, it just says *big*.”

It was the merchant from earlier who had given Milo the book, to save himself the trouble of throwing it away. Milo had seemed interested in it, so the arrangement benefitted both parties. For Milo, he could hope for nothing better than a detailed guide to all the creatures they would encounter on the hunt for the Rust-Eater, but the contents of the book failed to inspire much confidence in him. It looked like the result of a child’s school project.

“...Nah, I think we can trust it,” said Bisco. “It was written by a Mushroom Keeper, after all.”

“Oh gosh! Well, in that case...! But how do you know?”

“Jabi used to draw like this, too. The style looks the same. Very artistic, more than descriptive. That’s how we like to draw.”

The strange practices of Bisco’s people continued to befuddle, but Milo kept flipping through the pages of the book, admiring the playful images.

“Perhaps it was written by a Mushroom Keeper from the northeast. Do you see any names of mushrooms? They always wrote them down on drawings like this to indicate what kind of components the animal has. Like clamshell or wood ear.”

“Oh, there is, yes! In the bottom right, there’s a little stamp! Okay, then... erm...”

Milo hurriedly flipped through to one of the animals he saw earlier. There, in

the corner of the page, was a name, alongside a cute little drawing of a mushroom man.

“Rust-Eater...in hiragana?”

“Well, the kanji is too complicated... What’re you looking at me like that for? Most Mushroom Keepers have trouble with this kinda stuff.”

“Then it’s got to be this one! The Pipe Snake, commonly known as the tube worm. A colossal snake with two heads. Capable of flight. Only reacts to large prey and commonly feeds on helicopters and planes...”

“Yeah, that’s a real help. All Jabi told me was it was the biggest animal around these parts. It’s way better to have a picture drawn by a local.”

Milo nodded. As the train trundled along the rails, Milo scoured the page for whatever information he could pick out of the vague description. Just then, something fell from above and impacted the open page with a splat.

“Wah!” Milo cried. It was some sort of black sludge that stained the paper, and it appeared to be alive. It wiggled its feelers and immediately sprang toward Bisco’s face as he moved to protect his partner.

“Graargh!”

“Bisco!”

Black droplets splattered all around. Bisco quickly pulled out his knife and scraped the slime off his face, tossing it onto the floor of the carriage where it landed with a splat and stuck to the ground, shaking its tentacles. Several yellow eyes shone in the darkness all over its body, blinking out of sync with one another.

“Blegh, it’s an oilsquid,” Bisco groaned. “We must have passed through their nest. They’re coming along the walls.”

As the tunnel narrowed, the walls came into view, and it was soon clear that their black color was not due to the darkness at all, but instead, the wall was coated in a swarm of the small oily creatures that made Milo shiver in disgust. The train was hurtling along quite fast, but still the oilsquids were able to keep up, chasing after their prey with alarming speed.

“Just aim for the ones that’re jumping,” said Bisco. “Ignore the others.”

“But, Bisco, I can’t hit—”

“Yes, you can!” Bisco wiped the black residue off his face and locked eyes with Milo. “You can hit them. I know you can. Watch my back!”

“Bisco...”

“Well?”

“Yes, sir!” Milo replied. As if recognizing that a fight was about to start, the oilsquids all leaped from the ceiling in unison, hurtling toward the train.

The two stood back-to-back, brandishing their bows. One after the other, they shot the oilsquids out of the air. As one group leaped toward them, Milo netted them in one of his spiderweb arrows, and they fell onto the tracks. The ones he missed managed to stick to the carriage, whereupon Milo took one of the highly explosive flameshroom arrows at his waist and fired it. The hot fumes from the explosion caused the oilsquids to retract their feelers and topple off the carriage to the rails below.

“Nice one!” Bisco said as he smiled and pulled his bow with all his might. His thick arrow whistled through the air with frightening force flying close to the walls and scraping off dozens of the encroaching creatures.

Meanwhile, at the head of the train, Actagawa flailed wildly, brushing aside the oilsquids with his huge claws and chomping on them heartily. Letting loose a spray of foam from his mouth, he coated the rest of the sludge balls in a slippery substance that caused them to slide off the side of the train.

However, as fiercely as the group fought, the oilsquid swarm showed no signs of abating and, in fact, only seemed to come in greater and greater numbers. Soon there were more than could fit on the walls, and all they could see was an ocean of squid, crawling all over one another.

“There’s no end to them!” shouted Milo.

“Fine. Means we won’t be able to take this way back, but...!” Bisco gritted his teeth and snatched up a silver arrow that dangled from his quiver by a thread. He fired it from his bow, and it stuck into the roof of the tunnel, producing small

mushrooms that quickly spread across the rock face. This silver mushroom was covered in a sticky mucus and multiplied at an incredible rate, filling the surface of the tunnel in the blink of an eye. A strong, acrid smell, like vinegar, filled the cavern.

“Wow! What...is that?!”

“It’s a silveracid nameko!” Bisco shouted back, coughing. “Don’t breathe it in! Get down!”

The strong acid dissolved the pursuing oilsquids, halting them in their tracks. They turned into plain oil, and their eyeballs dropped from the ceiling and piled up on the rails. The entire colony of attacking squid was blocked off by the wall of mushrooms, and gradually the train left them well behind.

“W-we did it! They’re not following us!”

“Ugh. Dammit, that smell gets me every time,” Bisco swore. He heaved a sigh of relief as he watched the cave disappear behind him. Then he noticed something. Several long and narrow things crept along the cave walls. Then they suddenly reared up and became much thicker. Like lashing whips, they wrapped around Milo’s body just as he let down his guard.

“Waaahhh!”

“Milo!”

Bisco immediately fired his bow at the tentacles, but though his arrow was able to pierce them, the thick black membrane prevented the mushrooms from taking root. Milo held on to the rim of the luggage rack for dear life as they tried to drag him away and cried out in pain as they wrapped tightly around his waist.

“Grr! Argh! Gah!”

His sapphire eyes widened in pain. Bisco knew what he had to do. He rushed toward Milo, slicing apart the tentacles that came for him with his blade. He leaped onto the one that held his partner, driving his knife into the thick black skin and then, dangling from it, opened his mouth and bit into the tentacle. With all his strength, he pulled at it, hand and jaw, trying to tear the thing apart. The tentacle began to tear with a strange popping sound, before finally splitting in two and releasing Milo from its grip.

“Milo, go with Actagawa. Search the Weeping Valley. You know what we’re looking for.”

“Ahhh! Biscooo!”

But already the other tentacles had seized him and pulled him back off the train. His body skimmed against the ground like a stone, before disappearing into the darkness of the tunnel.

His countless collisions with the floor and walls left Bisco dazed. He shook his head, and when he regained his senses, he was surrounded on all sides by darkness. At the center of the thick black tentacles that grew like the roots of some enormous tree, a crucible of saw-shaped teeth dripped sticky mucus, expanding and contracting before Bisco’s very eyes. Through it, he could see the dark red of the oilsquid’s internal organs.

This is the leader, huh...?!

Its size was nothing like the small creatures he had fought on the train, which were no larger than a human head. It was so large that all Bisco could see was its mouth, and its body was clearly big enough to fill the entire tunnel. Bisco was held dangling by his left leg before those hellish rows of sharp teeth as the giant octopus, presuming the unconscious Bisco for dead, brought it closer to its mouth with the intention of swallowing him whole.

...Maybe it’ll work on his insides!

Bisco’s eyes glimmered, and he whipped out the bow on his back and fired a shot. His crimson tengu arrow flew into the creature’s mouth and embedded itself in the walls of its throat. At last finding suitable ground, the mushrooms happily swelled and ravaged the octopus’s gullet.

Its walls of flesh rippled as it let out a deep, bellowing cry and reared up with such force that it smashed into the walls of the tunnel. Bisco laughed, still gripped upside down by the creature’s tentacle.

“Heh, that’s why you pick your food more carefully! I’m poisonous!”

But the dull-witted kraken was slow to die, and in its death throes, it used its ridiculous strength to swing Bisco up into the roof of the cave. Before he even had time to cough up blood, he was swung down again into the ground, then

the sides, then the ceiling again. The maddened tentacle threw him all about the tunnel until cracks began to appear in the walls, and the entire track shook like it was caught in an earthquake.

Bisco's flesh tore, and his bones splintered as the rampaging octopus delivered a series of blows that ought to have killed him immediately. But Bisco's eyes still flared brightly through the bloodstains on his face, and he still had his bow. He mustered up the last of his strength, turning it into a powerful yell. Just as he was about to loose what may well have been his final arrow, an incredible force from elsewhere struck the octopus, and it reeled, tossing Bisco to the ground. An enormous mass of iron, glowing red-hot like a blast furnace, flew down the rails, its wheels screeching, and collided with the beast. Tripping over his own feet, Milo ran over, picked up Bisco's blood-soaked body in his arms, and fled.

"Oh, Bisco. What did he do to you...?"

"Guh... Mi... Milo... It's still..."

Persistent to the end, the tentacles of the giant octopus crawled along the walls of the cave after the pair. Realizing he couldn't outrun them, Milo turned and readied the bow on his back. With trembling hands, he pointed it toward the creature. What he had struck it with earlier was none other than the coal furnace of the train they had been riding, detached from the rest of the vehicle by Actagawa. The furnace was overloading, and even now steam poured out of it in thick jets, but the pressure valves were managing to keep the imminent explosion in check.

If I can just hit that...!

Beads of sweat rolled down Milo's face, panic gripped his heart, and his breath grew heavy. The creature's tentacles bore down on the two of them, threatening to wrap them up and whisk them away.

Just then, Milo's trembling hand was covered with another. At Bisco's touch, his bow steadied, and Milo focused intently on the power in his right hand.

"Archery is two things. First, watch closely."

Bisco's quiet words permeated Milo like drops of water on the desert sand.

“Then...believe.”

As the tentacles closed in, wrapping around his body, Milo held firm. His blue eyes burned silently, ignoring everything but the bonecoal furnace at the far end of his arrow.

Believe.

This'll hit, he thought.

The warm blood dripping down Bisco's hand and onto his own seemed to flow into him, setting his heart ablaze.

“Can you hit it?”

“...Yeah.”

Milo gave a silent nod and let go with his right hand. The blue arrow became a single beam of light that struck the steam valve and tore it clean off. The orange glow faded slightly before swelling in intensity, and a blast of hot air tore the tentacles apart and rippled the pair's cloaks. Then everything was engulfed in a blinding flash of white light and a deafening explosion.

Bisco and Milo were knocked clean out of the tunnel like baseballs and rolled along the ground beneath the clear blue sky. Just as they were about to topple over the edge of a deep chasm where the railroad suddenly ended, Actagawa barely managed to catch them safely in his claws.

The valley was blooming with lush green foliage. The beautiful sounds of songbirds filled the clear air beneath a cloudless sky.

The two were covered in soot, oil, blood, sweat, tears, and who knows what else. For a while, they just lay there in Actagawa's embrace. Suddenly, Milo clutched his mouth, before vomiting forth a jet-black sludge on the ground at Actagawa's feet.

“...Bweeghhh...”

“...Keh-heh-heh!”

“What's so funny?”

“What is that, morning sickness? Ha-ha-ha! Hmm? Bleeegh...” Just as Bisco

made fun of poor Milo, he, too, threw up black tar that stained the ground. Among it was a single oilsquid, holding a fragment of Bisco's tooth like a trophy, that attempted to spring away, only to topple over the cliff edge.

"Congratulations, Bisco. It's a boy," Milo said in wonder.

"...It's the immaculate conception," Bisco said, turning serious, as drops of oil spilled from his mouth. "Before you say anything, I didn't get up to anything freaky with that squid while you were gone... Besides, does it even work like that...?"

Milo was unable to hold back his giggles any longer and burst into laughter, clapping Bisco on the back. Actagawa looked on in confusion, unable to determine precisely what his companions were laughing about. Nonetheless, he hoisted them both up with his claws, and they landed neatly in their saddles. There, they were struck speechless by the beauty of the valley below.

"We're here, Bisco!"

"Yep... The Weeping Child Ravine. It's just as Jabi described. This has to be the place."

The ringing grass in the fields below grew taller than a human, and it swayed to and fro in the breeze like waves crashing against the shore. As it did so, it caught the sun with striking regularity, making the whole valley twinkle like the facets of a diamond in the light.

After simply watching it for a while in silence, Bisco spoke.

"Let's go, Milo. We're nearly there now."

Milo nodded, and as Bisco took the reins, Milo stared at his face in profile. Then he placed his hands on the cuts that covered Bisco's neck.

"Bisco, could you slow Actagawa down a little?"

"Sure. Like this?"

"Yeah, thanks. Now, hold still..."

Milo readied his needle and got to work patching Bisco up, by now well-accustomed to working atop a crab.

The Weeping Child Ravine. The *Ravine* part of the name came from the deep valleys carved into the land like scratches from a giant's fingernails, hidden by the long grass. As for the *Weeping Child* part, it was believed that this came from the sound of the wind as it swept through the valleys, which was said to be similar to crying children.

Occasionally, a pale-blue mist emerged from the valleys, blanketing the land and rendering it ever more mysterious to the onlooking duo.

"...It's such a beautiful place," said Milo. "But also, kind of lonely."

"You think? Hey, let's try looking in the valleys."

Bisco brought Actagawa to a halt and peered over the side of one of the chasms. There he saw beautiful blue mushrooms growing out of the sheer walls glowing slightly in the darkness that extended down and down to untold depths.

"Ah! M-mushrooms!" Milo exclaimed. "Then, this blue smoke..."

"Spores. The Mushroom Keepers came here, once, in search of the Rust-Eater... That was fifty years ago."

"And Jabi was with them?"

"Well, yeah, unless he made the whole thing up," said Bisco, grinning his usual cheeky smile. While at first glance he seemed the very picture of health, Milo could see the slight paling of his skin. Trying not to let his worry show too much, he forced a grin.

Bisco's wounds were grave. Milo had attempted to treat his wounds after they escaped the cave, but he had broken more than a few bones and taken quite a bit of damage to his internal organs. No ordinary person could survive such an ordeal, and there was no way even Bisco would be able to move about

like he normally did.

“The Rust-Eater is so strong that no matter what you mix it with, you’ll always end up with a Rust-Eater arrow,” said Bisco. “All we have to do is find it. And we’ve got the ‘large prey’ that it talked about in the book, too.”

“Hey, Bisco. Are you sure we have to do this today? Shouldn’t we wait for your wounds to heal...?”

“Don’t be silly. We don’t want our bait to go bad. All right, Actagawa, this is the spot.”

Saying this, Bisco dumped the huge carcass of the giant oilsquid (which he had gone back and dragged out of the tunnel) on the ground. The smell of grilled octopus filled the air, very out of place amid the lush vegetation.

“Now, we wait,” he said. “If it doesn’t show up in fifteen minutes, we’ll try someplace else.”

Milo had been holding back his concern over fears of dampening Bisco’s good spirits, but unable to do so any longer, he gave a gentle tug on Bisco’s cloak.

“...Bisco, I’m worried. You’ve lost a lot of blood. Can we at least perform a transfusion? We can use my blood if it matches... What blood type are you?”

“...? Blood type? What are you talking about? Blood has types?”

“You’re kidding! How can you not know your own blood type...?!”

Then Milo thought back to the time he tended to Jabi in the sewers of Imihama. Back then, Milo had supplemented the old man’s lost blood using some blood bags he happened to keep in the pockets of his lab coat. The curious thing had been that it didn’t seem to matter which blood he used—Jabi’s body accepted it without issue. Even Jabi himself seemed to have no idea what his own blood type was.

...Do Mushroom Keepers not know about blood types? Or does their blood itself not even—?

“...Milo, behind you!”

Milo had let down his guard. As Bisco leaped to protect him, a huge vermillion bird with black markings flew up out of a nearby ravine and shot into the air,

just grazing the pair.

“Wow, what is that, a bird?!” said Milo.

“Uh-oh! It’s coming for the octopus!”

Indeed, the bird didn’t so much as register the two insignificant specks below and instead snatched up the oilsquid’s body, gripping it so tightly between its powerful talons that not even Actagawa was able to stop it.

“Dammit, not on my watch!”

Bisco’s emerald eyes glimmered as he readied his bow and sent an arrow flying directly toward the bird’s head.

Just then, there was a low groan and a gust of air as something else, long and white, rose out of the ravine and extended far up into the sky. All along its sides, hundreds of legs that looked exactly like human fingers jutted out of its white, glistening skin. Like a whirlpool, the creature twisted in the air, before clamping its white, pillar-like teeth down on the bird midflight. With no way to escape, the bird was crunched by the monster’s powerful jaw and swallowed, with the carcass of the oilsquid following it down the creature’s gullet not long after.

As the two watched on in shock, the titanic, long, white creature let out another low cry, before turning in the air and diving down into a different chasm in the ground, with a rumble like a clap of thunder. The wind kicked up by the thing made Milo’s and Bisco’s hair stand on end, and all they could do was stare in disbelief, before, at last, Bisco shook his head and pointed after the beast.

“That’s the Pipe Snake!”

“I-it’s so big...”

Just as the book had described, it was a colossal snake with two heads and no eyes or nose. However, compared to the childish drawing found in the book, the real thing was of such an unimaginable size as to leave them paralyzed with fear.

“Th-that’s not a snake; that’s a dragon!” shouted Milo.

“I don’t care what it is; an arrow pierces it all the same. Let’s go.”



Bisco raced Actagawa toward the ravine the snake disappeared down. Taking a wire-laden arrow from his hip, he fired it across to the far cliff.

“Huuuh?! Bisco, what are you doing?!”

“We don’t know where it’s gonna pop up next! You two stay on this side; I’ll check over there!”

Before Bisco even finished, the arrow was already reeling him across the chasm. Milo was about to call out his protests, but then suddenly his vision went white as the creature rose between them and gently curved into the air, sending Milo’s cloak aflutter. It was indeed as majestic as a dragon. It spent a surprisingly long time in the air before disappearing back the way it came, its hundreds of appendages scraping messily at the valley walls. Milo squeezed his own body to suppress the rising fear... Then he remembered his sister’s arms around him—and Bisco’s face as he talked about his dying master.

We’ll take that thing down. Bisco can... We can do anything!

Milo looked up with determination in his eyes. Perhaps Actagawa felt it, too, for, eager to partake in the big-game hunt, he let out a war cry and raced furiously after the strange white creature.

“It’s huge...!”

Bisco was no stranger to hunting large game, but it was safe to say this was his biggest target yet by far. He had already tried firing a couple arrows at it as it passed, but that only resulted in a smattering of tiny mushrooms that didn’t even register to the huge snake.

“Its scales are too thick... Maybe its mouth or its belly... Dammit, how am I supposed to damage it?”

As Bisco pondered this, he suddenly heard something. The sound of an object scraping against the ground. Bisco had his back to the cliff face, so there was nowhere to hide, and yet the sound gradually became louder, like the growling of some fierce beast. It seemed to be coming straight toward him.

What is that? It’s not the Pipe Snake. It sounds like...a motorcycle...?

As soon as the thought occurred to him, Bisco was struck with terror. He

looked directly overhead just in time to see...

“Aaakaaaboooshiii!”

With a banshee screech, a woman on a white motorcycle was shooting down the near-vertical cliff toward him. The black hair that flowed from the silver skullcap on her head was drawn straight up behind her like a comet’s tail. It was the captain of the Imihama Vigilante Corps, Pawoo, brandishing her iron staff with murder in her eyes.

“Swift is Heaven’s vengeance!”

“Where the hell did you come from?!”

The speeding motorcycle collided with the earth like a meteorite, tearing up the grass and throwing clouds of dust into the air. Bisco leaped away at the last second, narrowly avoiding the bike and loosing an arrow in retaliation. Pawoo deflected it effortlessly with her staff, and not a second later, she tore through the dust cloud on her motorcycle, coming right for Bisco.

Bisco fired a couple more shots, but Pawoo blocked them all with a twirl of her staff, before swinging the heavy metal weapon toward him. As she passed by Bisco again and again, he used his bow as a shield to block her strikes, then, on the third, he swung his bow at her head, hitting her solidly in the face.

But Pawoo didn’t fall off her vehicle, instead stopping to wipe the blood from her mouth and glare at Bisco as the wind howled across the meadow.

“Hey, you’re a lot better than before,” said Bisco. He wasn’t lying. His forehead was uncharacteristically slick with sweat. “Good work following me this far out. I’m surprised you made it here by motorcycle. How did you know where I was?”

“Milo’s ring contains a tracking device. I gave it to him when he was fourteen and told him never to take it off.”

Pawoo answered with bold resolution in her beautiful voice. She then swept her iron staff through the air and pointed it right between Bisco’s eyes.

“Your fate is sealed, Man-Eating Redcap. Hand over my brother.”

“...Listen here, lady. Bein’ there for family is great ‘n’ all, but it’s Milo who

asked to come out here with *me*.” Bisco seemed to be trying his best to explain himself as the woman burned hot like a glowing slab of metal. “An’ it was all because he wanted to find the Rust-Eater and save your life! Isn’t that a nice story? Why’ve you gotta beat me to death with that metal stick of yours? I’m trying to help him, y’know?!”

“How dare you... How dare you lead him astray, filling his head with lies!” Pawoo brandished her staff. “Enough talk, Akaboshi. I am my brother’s shield, not the other way around. Prepare yourself!”

“Listen to me! You’re not his shield; you’re his cage! You’ve gotta give him a little space! Have you never heard the term *helicopter parent*?”

“...Milo’s my brother.”

“...Oh, right... Sorry, your face is kinda old-looking.”

“I’ll kill you!”

Pawoo revved the bike’s engine and shot toward Bisco, when all of a sudden, the huge white snake leaped up out of a deep ravine just beside the two of them. One of its feelers struck Pawoo with such force as to render her unconscious before even giving her the chance to scream, then swept her up along with her motorcycle into the clear, blue sky.

“Dammit, why did you have to pick such a weird spot to have a fight?!” cried Bisco, but before he could draw his bow, something orange glinted in the sun as it jumped from the cliff above.

“Milo!”

Milo was riding Actagawa and sprang from the cliff face, out toward his captured sister. Flying through the air, he landed on the snake’s body.

“I’m gonna use Actagawa to cut her loose! Bisco, get ready to catch!”

“Okay!” cried Bisco up toward that tiny blue-haired figure.

At Milo’s command, Actagawa tore off the snake’s finger with a swing of his claw, and Pawoo and her motorcycle fell back down toward the rippling fields of grass. Bisco jumped toward them like an acrobat, catching them in midair and landing in the depths of the valley before shouting back up to Milo.

“Get away, Milo! Any higher and you won’t be able to come back down!”

“Okay!” Milo said, and Actagawa leaped from the snake’s white skin toward the ground. Just then, something huge, sticky, and pink snatched them from the air.

“Ah! Actagawa!”

Actagawa reacted instantly, catching the Pipe Snake’s tongue in his huge pincers. However, he only cut halfway through it before it closed around him.

“Miloooo!” screamed Bisco.

The two-headed snake shot even higher into the sky, far beyond the reach of Bisco’s voice, taking his partner and beloved crab far, far away.

“...! A-aaarghhh! No... No! Milo!”

Bisco turned to see Pawoo on the ground, shaking helplessly at the sight. She was so gripped by the fear of Milo being taken from her that she couldn’t even think.

“Get back on your bike, idiot!” shouted Bisco. “If he goes back underground, we’ve lost him!”

“Wh-what are we supposed to do against that...that monster?!”

“We’ve fought and beaten monsters in the past. This one’s no different,” he said. Then Bisco turned to her, opened both his eyes, and bellowed. “Hurry up! Or are you just gonna sit there and watch your brother die?”

Now was not the time to argue. Pawoo revved up her motorcycle, and Bisco hopped aboard as she accelerated to top speed in a flash. As the Pipe Snake flew through the air, she stormed after it, swerving left and right to dodge the boulders that fell down from above like snares.

“I’m gonna attempt to hit it with an anchor arrow! Can you try matching its speed?”

“I can do better than try! ...You just make sure the anchor hits its mark!”

“You know what? You’re pretty— Look out, there’s a cliff ahead!”

“Got it!” said Pawoo, striking the ground with her staff. The large motorcycle

flew up into the air, performing a somersault and landing safely on the far side of the gaping chasm.

“Blegh. I didn’t ask for the gymnastics.”

“Silence! Is this close enough?”

Bisco eyed the Pipe Snake, which was now well within striking range, and took a deep breath. As he watched its white body writhing across the sky, he hesitated. His earlier shots had failed to find purchase on the creature’s thick scales. Even Pawoo could see his right hand wavering as it clasped the drawstring.

“Akaboshi...!”

“What?!”

“I’m trusting you...!”

Pawoo turned around, and Bisco’s eyes met hers. Her trembling, helpless, tear-soaked eyes. They reminded him of Milo’s when he was scared.

They really do look alike, Bisco thought, and he lowered his bow. Then he felt a strange calmness pass over him and a mysterious focus take hold.

If an arrow won’t work...

Bisco exhaled and reached for the weapon on his back. Bisco’s idea was a risky one, but when had they ever not been? Bisco only ever believed in his own success.

Milo had lost track of how many times the gale-force winds had almost knocked him out. Desperately, he clung to the Pipe Snake’s side for dear life. Using his numbshroom arrows, he had tried to get Actagawa free from the creature’s grip, but the snake was merciless, and its huge tongue still wrapped tightly around Actagawa’s claw. By crawling along the surface of its colossal body, Milo had managed to get near the snake’s tongue and jabbed his knife into it with all his might. However, the thick appendage was completely unyielding to Milo’s blade.

Poor Actagawa’s going to be swallowed up if I don’t do something...!

Suddenly, an idea flashed into Milo’s mind. He pulled out a silvery vial from

his belt and gulped. Then he turned to Actagawa.

“I’m sorry, Actagawa... This is going to be really scary. Can you trust me?”

Actagawa was a crab. His facial expression was inscrutable. But just as he always did when Milo hugged him, he let out a single bubble. Milo nodded and took a deep breath. He searched for the opening in Actagawa’s iron shell at the base of his claw and thrust the vial inside. Soon Actagawa’s arm began to sizzle, and a white smoke rose from the area as the liquid ate away at his flesh.

The silvery substance was a concentrated mixture of silveracid nameko and oilsquid mucus to make a powerful dissolving agent. Quickly, Milo drew his bow and shot an iron arrow right at the base of Actagawa’s claw. With a sickening crack, Actagawa’s limb was severed from his body. He fell, no longer restrained by the Pipe Snake’s tongue, and tumbled through the air before landing neatly on his feet in the grasslands below.

Phew...!

A look of relief spread across Milo’s face as he watched Actagawa land. Behind him, the huge tongue gradually recovered from its paralysis and swept Actagawa’s claw down the Pipe Snake’s unfathomable gullet. Then it approached Milo. Milo readied his next arrow and kept his chattering teeth in check. He was scared, but he didn’t let it overcome him. His face, once sweet and innocent, now gleamed with the fierce integrity of a warrior.

If Bisco were here..., he thought, tightening his bowstring. He thought back on his journey, so long and arduous, and yet it felt like they had been together such a short time.

...He wouldn’t give up! Not until the last shot!

The tongue whipped and flew toward Milo. Milo filled his arrow with everything he had.

But before he could fire, there was a flash of steel before his eyes and a ringing crash like an iron stake being driven through sheet metal. A long, metal spike came out of nowhere, pinning the tongue to the exterior of the Pipe Snake’s body. As Milo looked on in shock, the object continued on, piercing its thick scales and punching a hole clean through the monster’s body.

“Ah... Ah...!”

Milo froze, bow in hand. His skin went numb from the force of the impact. Then, from below, he heard the voice he so longed to hear at that moment.

“Milooo! I fired the harpoon! Come down on the wire!”

Indeed, it was no arrow Bisco fired, but Nuts’s treasured family heirloom. No arrow could bear Bisco’s monstrous strength faithfully into the scales of the beast. Only the harpoon was heavy enough to put all the power Bisco could impart behind its formidable point. And the resulting shot was unreal.

“Wh-what the hell was that...?” Pawoo looked on in utter disbelief from atop her motorcycle. “How did you even fire that thing with your bow?!”

“Because I believed it could be done. You’ve just got no imagination,” Bisco retorted, fastening the harpoon’s wire to his own body. “Milo, get down here before he goes back underground!”

“O-okay! I’m coming!”

Milo grabbed on to the wire and zip-lined down into the turbulent winds.

“Ah, Milo...!” Pawoo breathed a short sigh of relief. But just then, the Pipe Snake, deprived of one of its two heads, spun around in the air. Its other head came flying toward Milo, its maw like the entrance to some huge cave, threatening to close around him. The sheer scale of the beast meant that no mere human could do anything but flounder helplessly in the air.

“Don’t let go, Milo! Whatever you do!”

As the Pipe Snake’s twisting body jerked back onto the wire, Bisco was pulled from the motorcycle. Milo and Bisco tumbled through the air like toys as the whiplike tongue of the colossal creature closed in on them.

Pawoo leaped into the air to protect them, striking the snake’s tongue with her staff, but it was ripped from her hands and disappeared down into the beast’s mouth. With a shake of its head, the Pipe Snake sent Pawoo hurtling back to earth, then, returning to its original prey, it engulfed Milo and Bisco within its terrible jaw.

“Grh... Gagh...!” Pawoo coughed blood as she struck the ground, looking up at

the snake's peaceful form as it circled in the air. Then she turned her eyes away and choked out several wordless sobs.

At that moment, there was a sudden, rumbling bellow that shook the earth.

"Bwoooooooooaaahhh!"

Pawoo realized. The Pipe Snake was crying.

Gaboom! Gaboom! Giant mushrooms sprouted all across the snake's body, punching through its skin. As it writhed across the sky in pain, it gradually started losing altitude. Then something long and thin burst out of the snake's scalp and tore a straight line through the top of its head. It was Pawoo's staff.

"Milo!" Pawoo cried.

From out of the hole climbed Milo and Bisco, covered head to toe in mucus. They both held on to Pawoo's staff with one hand and supported each other with their other hands. Then they shouted in unison.

""Actagawaaa!""

In response to their voice, the giant crab leaped out of a nearby crevasse and shot across the plains with a ferocious gallop. The two jumped off into the air just as the dying Pipe Snake collided with the ground. Actagawa sprang up, caught them within his legs, and rolled along the ground, stopping just short of a crumbling cliff face. After narrowly avoiding falling down into the depths of the chasm, Actagawa collapsed, exhausted.

"Milooo!"

Pawoo staggered over to the giant crab and lifted her beloved brother into her arms. He was covered in the Pipe Snake's viscous bodily fluids, but his heart was beating softly and steadily.

"Milo! Oh, Milo! Thank God you're okay...!"

"Pawoo, look!"

Milo shrugged off any concern for his own well-being and pulled himself up, taking his sister's hand and walking over to Bisco's side. Bisco was gazing off into the distance at the Pipe Snake's fallen body that stretched wide over the chasm like an enormous bridge.

“Bisco! Is that...?!”

“The Rust-Eater...!”

From the snake’s long, smooth body, a huge, dazzling cluster of orange mushrooms rose like the sunrise over a white, snowy plain. The three of them stood there, taking in the majestic sight, each of them struck with such awe that they forgot the pain of their injuries.

The bright-orange tones of the Rust-Eater made for a striking contrast against the lush greenery of the valley. As the trio approached, they felt a slight warmth emanating from the mushrooms.

“This is the Rust-Eater...?! That legendary mushroom that can counteract the Rust...?” said Pawoo in wonder.

“It sure is, Pawoo!” said Milo, overjoyed, holding his sister’s hand and looking up at the mushrooms. “We finally did it! Now we can cure you!”

“...Hmm? Maybe not. Something’s wrong,” said Bisco, tilting his head at the scent of the spores scattering down from above. Ignoring the great deal of damage to his own body, he sprang up onto the Pipe Snake’s carcass, tore off a piece of the mushroom cluster, and dropped back down in front of the other two. Then he gazed at the piece in his hands intently and took a bite.

“...Just as I thought. It’s too weak.”

“Too weak...? Bisco, what do you mean by that?”

“All mushrooms have the power to feed on the Rust. The Rust-Eater is just the best at it. But this mushroom’s power, its taste... It’s no different than the regular mushrooms that grow around here.”

“Wh-what...? But...but we struggled so hard...”

Milo’s face fell as he took the mushroom in his hand. After such a fierce battle, was it all for nothing? Meanwhile, Bisco’s face was stern and rugged, and his worry for Jabi was plain to see.

“This one’s a dud. That’s all there is to it. We’ve still got some time before the sun sets. We’ll just have to find another.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Akaboshi! None of us are in any shape to fight, least of all you!”

“We don’t have time. If you’re too beat-up to come with me, I won’t force you. I can do it alone—”

“You’re the most beat-up one here, Bisco!” said Milo, gripping him by the scruff of the neck as he walked away and spinning him around. “If you try to fight another one of those things, you’ll die for sure! Get your head out of your ass for once and stop making us worry!”

“So—what? You’re happy to come all this way for nothing?! Let go of me!”

Bisco jerked back his bloodied hand, and Milo fell over into the sea of grass. With trembling eyes, he watched Bisco leave and felt a strange pulsing warmth in his hand, so he sprang to his feet.

“B-Bisco! Come back! The Rust-Eater! It’s...!”

Bisco spun around, and what he saw stopped him in his tracks. There in Milo’s hand, the orange mushroom glowed like a ball of fire.

“...What’s going on? That’s the same mushroom, right?”

“Yeah... Oh, I know! Bisco, let me have some of your blood!”

Saying this, Milo wiped some blood off Bisco’s neck and dribbled it over the Rust-Eater.

“I thought so... Look, Bisco!”

It was clear to anyone who saw it that the Rust-Eater was undergoing some sort of transformation. The part that Milo covered in Bisco’s blood began glowing, and the patterns on the cap’s surface started to shift.

“What the hell...? Is it drinkin’ my blood? What kinda magic is this, Milo?”

“I’ll explain later. First, let’s seek refuge in that cave over there. We need to patch you up, Bisco. The Pipe Snake did a number. I’m shocked you can even stand.”

“Are you crazy? We finally got the loot we’re after, and you wanna rest?”

“Your health comes first. If you don’t listen to what I say, this goes over the cliff.”

“Okay, okay, okay! I get it! Don’t chuck it!”

With a gentle sigh, Pawoo smiled at her little brother as he turned and beckoned to her. Whether it was a sigh of relief at seeing how Milo had grown or of jealousy at the redheaded thug who walked alongside him, or some mixture of the two, even Pawoo herself could not explain.

“Jabi told me just before we left Imihama,” said Milo. “The Rust-Eater wasn’t able to eat rust immediately after growing.”

“Huh...? He never told me that...”

“Hey, I told you to sit still!” At Milo’s warning, Bisco clammed up like a scolded Doberman.

“Apparently, many Mushroom Keepers lost their lives in the search for the Rust-Eater. The others went to bury their fallen friends and surrounded the graves with Rust-Eater mushrooms to create a new garden for them. Then, a few days later, when they came back to say their final farewells...”

“...The Rust-Eaters had transformed?” asked Pawoo. Milo nodded as he finished wrapping Bisco’s bandages.

“That’s what Jabi said. And so it came to be known among the Mushroom Keepers that a miracle cure was born in honor of the fallen heroes.”

“But you suspected it was their blood that did the trick,” said Bisco. “And it turned out to be true.”

“And it can’t just be any blood; it has to be the blood of a Mushroom Keeper. There’s something special about it...about you, Bisco, and Jabi, too. Unlike the rest of us, you can give blood to anyone and receive blood from anyone.”

Milo quelled the soft pain in his heart as he stuck a syringe into Bisco’s neck and drew out his blood, depositing it into a vial. The deep crimson almost seemed to glow with Bisco’s life force.

“I see; I guess that logic makes sense. But then, how come Jabi never told me about any of this? Why didn’t he tell me about the thing we were after?”

“Think about it, Bisco. We only found out your blood was the key seconds ago. Going by Jabi’s story, he might have thought that to activate the Rust-Eater, you were going to need to give up somebody’s life...”

“What?! I’d never do that!”

“Wouldn’t you?” asked Pawoo. “Isn’t that why they call you the Man-Eating Redcap?”

“You know, you’re pretty talkative for a muscle-bound gorilla!”

Milo ignored the squabbling of the two meatheads and carefully injected Bisco’s blood into his sample of the Rust-Eater mushroom. Shortly thereafter, the Rust-Eater began emitting spores that glowed like sparks, and the whole thing burned red like smoldering firewood. The marbled patterns on the cap started to swirl and shift like galaxies, and the dark cave was filled with light.

“W-wow...!”

All stopped and gasped in amazement. It felt like they were witnessing one of the world’s most hidden secrets. Milo shook himself out of his stupor and dropped the glowing mushroom into his machine. The powerful solution inside the tubes of reinforced glass dissolved the Rust-Eater immediately, becoming an orange liquid that shone with an impossible light.

“It’s like a riddle,” Pawoo muttered. “It had to have been deliberately designed. These Mushroom Keepers are more intelligent than society gives them credit for. Their pharmaceutical technology is centuries ahead of the rest of the world. It wouldn’t be a stretch to call them bearers of divine revelation.” She scratched her cracked lips with the nail of her thumb. Then she turned to Bisco. “Perhaps things would have turned out differently if this red monkey over here wasn’t running about causing chaos and giving the Mushroom Keepers a bad name.”

“What did you say...?! Maybe if you guys hadn’t been so hardheaded...! Grh...!”

Bisco grimaced in pain, and Milo rushed to his side.

“Please don’t fight; you’re both badly hurt!”

“Well, don’t just space out, Milo! You need more blood, don’t ya? Hop to it!”

“I can’t, Bisco! You’ll die if I take any more! Think about yourself for once!”

“Well, people always call me Bloody Bisco, so I must have more than most

people. Another poke can't hurt!"

"No, Bisco!"

As Pawoo watched her brother argue, she saw a side of him she had never witnessed before. A Milo full of life and charm. He spoke to Bisco like a son to his cherished father, yet also a mother with concern for her reckless child. It was this mixture of admiration and affection that expressed their relationship more eloquently than any words could.

He must really love him...

She couldn't say it out loud. It was lonely, but she also felt a strange sort of relief washing over her. She looked back at Bisco, his ferocious canines and vermillion tattoo. He didn't exactly look like an upstanding gentleman, but he possessed an indomitable spirit that allowed him to pierce through all obstacles in his path, as evidenced by his earlier battle with the Pipe Snake.

"The Man-Eating Redcap, Bisco Akaboshi..." Pawoo muttered his name to herself, then stood up.

"Where are you going, Pawoo?" asked Milo. "It's dangerous outside at night."

"To fix my bike. I may be badly wounded, but I can do that much, at least."

"Didn't know Imihama had gorillas who could fix bikes," said Bisco. "City of marvels."

"Ha! That's nowhere near as impressive as a monkey who can fire a bow."

"Say that again! To my face!"

"Stop it!" said Milo. "Oh no, your wounds are reopening! You're losing blood! Calm down!"

Pawoo chuckled and walked toward the cave entrance. Suddenly, a searchlight beam cut through the night, illuminating the fallen Pipe Snake's body, and a fearsome wind flattened the ringing grass, scattering leaves into the air.

"What's that?!" said Bisco, running over to her. "Dammit, you've led the Vigilante Corps right to us!"

“No, I haven’t!” said Pawoo, squinting. “...Look, it’s a military weapon! It’s massive...”

Looking closely, Bisco could make out the shape of a giant anglerfish adorned with weapons and armor of all kinds. It was a large airborne mobile-weapons platform known colloquially as a Flying Fatty.

“Is it from North Miyagi Military Base...? Why is it here?!” asked Pawoo. Suddenly, a familiar voice echoed through a megaphone.

“Hello, Akaboshi. I’ve been following your travels very closely, but the chance to kill you never came up. Honestly, it’s rather embarrassing, but...I have no shot of defeating you in a fair fight, you see... I was at my wit’s end with how to deal with you.”

Poking out of an open hatch in the roof of the Flying Fatty was a man with jet-black eyes, holding on tightly to his hat as the high winds threatened to whisk it away.

“And wouldn’t you know it, my indecisiveness has been rewarded! You’ve come across the legendary cure to the Rust, the Rust-Eater! It’s a good thing you didn’t die on me, Redcap!”

“Whaddaya mean by that...?” Bisco seethed. His emerald eyes clashed with Kurokawa’s own. “I thought you seemed familiar. You’re Imihama’s governor. How did you know where I was? Have your goons been tailing me?!”

“Heavens, no. Trying to keep up with you would be like trying to scale Mount Everest in the nude. And we’re shorthanded enough as it is these days.” Suddenly, Kurokawa shrieked as his hat was finally blown away by the wind. Then he continued, an utterly disappointed look on his face. “I thought you might use the train. So I requested the service records. And wouldn’t you know it, there was one line that saw sudden use after decades of inactivity.”

Suddenly, Milo ran over and tugged on Bisco’s sleeve. “Bisco! Pawoo! Let’s hide deeper in the cave! Even if he sends his men in, they’re no match for the three of us!”

“But they’re gonna take the Rust-Eater!”

“That’s right; scuttle off into the shadows for me, please!” Kurokawa’s

droning voice rang out over the Weeping Valley. “I’m absolutely dreadful at multitasking, you see, and there are so very many of these mushrooms to harvest. This should please the central government a great deal.”

As Kurokawa spoke, several thick hooks launched out of the Flying Fatty and embedded themselves in the Pipe Snake’s body, which by now had become a veritable forest of Rust-Eater mushrooms. Slowly, the titan’s carcass began to lift off the ground and into the air.

“Dammit, not if I can help it!”

“Bisco, no! It’s too dangerous!”

But before Milo could stop him, Bisco leaped up toward the Flying Fatty. Its machine guns swiveled and fired at him, but he evaded them all with the agility of a mountain dog, drew his bow, and struck the anglerfish right between the eyes. However, nothing happened. Bisco’s explosive mushrooms were nowhere to be seen.

“...?! My arrows... Why aren’t they working?”

Small redcaps started to grow on the creature’s face, but they quickly turned black and withered. It was the first time any artificial object had resisted Bisco’s mushrooms.

“Ho-ho, those almost bloomed, even with all the protective coating I applied. That’s scary. It really does terrify me to go up against you in the flesh, Akaboshi... I’m quaking in my boots.”

Kurokawa gave a shiver, before turning to the rabbit-headed man in the pilot’s seat.

“Finger off the trigger, hotshot. You’ll damage the goods. Take us up.”

“Sir! Akaboshi is weakened! We could finish him off right now, and the others would be too distraught to come after us!”

“...Careful. If you don’t show the Mushroom Keepers a little more respect...”

Before Kurokawa could finish, a bright-red arrow shattered the reinforced glass of the cockpit, grazing the pilot’s cheek and embedding itself in his seat. The explosive force of the blooming mushroom catapulted the rabbit-headed

man through the shattered window.

“...then that’s what will happen to you,” continued Kurokawa as he watched the man sail through the air and disappear into the depths of a shadowy gorge. Sweeping the enlarged mushroom off the pilot’s seat, he sat himself down at the controls and turned the Flying Fatty around, machine guns blazing.

“We *will* meet again, Akaboshi! Consider this my engagement ring!”

As his craft turned to leave, Kurokawa leveled his handgun and fired. A sulfur-yellow streak flew through the air toward Bisco. Already overwhelmed dodging the machine guns, Bisco was unable to evade it, and Kurokawa’s bullet found its target in his side.

“Grh... Gah!”

“Bisco!”

Milo broke free of his sister’s restraint and rushed over to Bisco. Blood was pouring from his flank, along with a sticky yellow substance, as he gritted his teeth in wide-eyed pain.

“That bastard, he used a rust round...!” said Bisco, coughing up blood.

Rust rounds were a cruel and devious technology that infected their targets with the Rust. It spread from the point of impact, eating away at the target’s flesh.

“Oh no, not you too! Bisco...!”

But Bisco wasn’t looking at Milo’s tearstained eyes. He glared up into the night sky, driving his anger into Kurokawa’s sullen sockets as the Imihama governor turned his craft around and absconded with the Rust-Eater.

“Hey, are you sure you don’t want the shot?” Milo looked a little worried as Pawoo sat atop her motorcycle.

All that remained of the bountiful Rust-Eater harvest were the scraps they had scavenged beforehand. Enough for two doses. Originally, that would have meant their mission was complete, and Pawoo and Jabi could both be cured. But the only way to get Jabi his dose on time was for Pawoo to take the Vigilante Corps highway that stretched all the way to Imihama.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Kurokawa has his spies hidden among the vigilantes, and by now, he’s probably noticed that the Rust-Eaters he stole aren’t working. If he sees that I’ve been cured, he’ll know we hold the secret to awakening them. We don’t know to what lengths he’ll go to find out.”

Pawoo’s smile was radiant in the light of the morning sun.

“It’s fine, Milo. Once I’ve given Jabi his dose, I’ll take mine. Then I’ll keep Kurokawa distracted while you find a way to get close to him. I should be able to keep his goons off you while you do that.”

Then Pawoo turned to Bisco, who wore a sour expression.

“Akaboshi, you need to be prepared if you’re to go up against him. He’s a despicable coward...which means he’s capable of anything. The vigilantes and the other prefectures have all had trouble laying their hands on him. So look out; he’s a crafty bastard.”

“...If he finds out he needs Mushroom Keeper blood to activate the Rust-Eater, he’ll come after Jabi and me. One way or another, he needs to be dealt with,” said Bisco lazily as he cracked his neck. “It’s way easier to just kill him than look after all you guys.”

“...I don’t like to admit it, but Milo is safer with you right now. Milo is my life. I’m trusting you. Take care of him.”

“...Yeah, sure. You want him back by midnight, too?” Bisco was so thrown off by Pawoo’s words that, for once, he didn’t seem to have the energy to start a fight. “Well, you look after yourself, too, I guess. It’d be a shame if you died right after I saved your life.”

Pawoo simply stared at the mad dog’s face...and when Milo got up to tend to Actagawa, she quietly beckoned Bisco over.

“...And take this.”

In Pawoo’s hand was the medicine vial her brother had only just given her.

“What?! You need that, don’t you? Milo made that for—”

“I can’t look after him anymore, Akaboshi. Only you can. Especially if you’re going up against Kurokawa. He needs your strength.”

Pawoo looked down at the bandages covering Bisco's side.

"The Rust isn't too bad now, but it'll get worse. It'll probably spread faster than normal, too. If you have to, use it."

"Pawoo... You..."

"Heh. You finally used my name."

The warrior Pawoo flashed a rare smile that seemed to glimmer in the dawn's light.

"Now, get going and beat Kurokawa. You can worry about me after that. Hey, it just means I trust you; that's all."

"...Fine. If that's what you really want, I'll take it." Bisco nodded and quickly hid the vial in his pocket just as Milo returned. "Not that it matters, 'cause I'm gonna kill him in the blink of an eye anyway. We're just doin' things in a different order, I guess. But if this is meant to pay me back for savin' your life, then it doesn't count."

Pawoo simply gave a bewitching smile that froze Bisco in his tracks. Then she stroked his chin and brought her face close to his.

"Do you still remember what you said to me when we first fought?" she whispered, her voice soft and smooth. "You said I had a pretty face. Even though it's marred by the Rust. Only you would say that, Akaboshi."

Bisco was so unnerved that all he could do was avert his gaze.

"And now that I look closely...", she continued, "...you're not too bad yourself."

"Wha—?!"

Bisco jumped back, and Pawoo giggled. Then she twisted the accelerator and rode off.

"You're just a bit too young for my taste!" she said as she disappeared into the Weeping Valley, bathed in the morning glow. Bisco ground his teeth in anger and tried to shout something after her in response, but the words that came to mind all got stuck in his throat, and he simply watched her go in silence.

Bisco didn't dare look, but he could feel Milo's grinning face burning a hole through him. Unfortunately, he didn't need to, for the young doctor quickly ran around and stared at him curiously.

"What is it? You got a problem?!"

"Hey, Bisco, do you have a girlfriend? You don't, right? Well, what do you think of Pawoo...?"

"People can't marry gorillas."

"Doesn't she just make your heart flutter?"

"No."

"She's an E cup, by the way."

"Shut up! What's gotten into you?!"

As Actagawa strutted over to see what all the fuss was about, Bisco turned away to hide his embarrassment and tried to change the subject.

"According to Pawoo, that flying anglerfish was from Shimobuki Garrison. It's a bit of a detour, but let's head back to Shimobuki through the wetlands. There, we can steal back the Rust-Eaters."

"Okay, Bisco!"

Then Bisco gave a nod and hopped up with his usual agility atop Actagawa's saddle...only to fall off, tumbling into the grass below. Bisco lifted himself off the ground in shock, as if even he didn't understand what just happened. Then he began coughing violently.

"Bis...co...!"

As Actagawa looked on in confusion, Bisco's eyes went wide with shock and discouragement. He had failed to ride Actagawa. That simple mistake had made it painfully clear to him just how weak he had become.

Milo ran over and helped Bisco to his feet. Bisco gave a small chuckle and wiped the blood from his mouth.

"...Heh. Sorry. I'm slowing us down."

"Don't say that..."

“Just look at me. At least I can’t shout at you anymore, eh?”

“Don’t say that!”

Milo looked like he was about to burst into tears. Bisco brushed his arm aside and leaped atop Actagawa once more. After helping Milo up, he spoke in a quiet voice.

“I’m fine, Milo. I’m strong. I’m like a bear who keeps fighting despite being covered in wounds. Even if poison ravages my body, there ain’t a single scratch on my soul. My heart keeps beating all the same.”

“...”

“Let’s go.”

Milo said nothing. As Actagawa started to shift himself along, Milo simply leaned his head on Bisco’s side and thought.

Are you angry, Bisco? I suppose so.

But all the wounds you’ve taken on my behalf...I’ll take for you.

I’ll be your shield. Your spear.

My body may be small, but I can give you all my heart.

And I can protect you from everything that stands in your way.

Actagawa’s orange shell glittered in the brilliant morning sun. The faces of the two boys atop him were marked with cuts and bruises, and yet there was a beautiful magnificence in their noble resolution.

The sun peeked through gaps in the clouds, shining down on the bright chocolate-colored mud. The swamp stretched as far as the eye could see, and here and there were lush ferns with modest flowers, creeping over mossy rocks.

The Northern Shimobuki Wetlands saw a gentler climate, free of the blizzards that ravaged the land farther south. It was funny to think that this mosquito-filled marsh made for a welcome sight to merchants on their way back home to the north.

The body of a fallen traveler lay facedown on the ground, half submerged in mud. From time to time, a small gust of wind would blow, and the cloak would give the occasional flutter, as if finally remembering the laws of physics.

A single swamp pig swam through the mud and approached the body, examining it carefully with its nose. Soon another pig surfaced, and the two began to circle the corpse, each regarding the other's movements with no small amount of suspicion.

Then one of the pigs made a move, catching the corpse's arm in its tusks and cutting into its flesh. Red droplets sprayed from the pink fat within, imbuing the marshlands with the foreign scent of blood. At this, the pigs were able to contain their hunger no longer and descended on the body, mouths slavering.

Just then, mud scattered everywhere as the corpse gripped the pig by its tusk and leaped to its feet. The pig sailed through the air as if it were no heavier than a dandelion puff, before coming down hard, striking its head on a nearby rock and falling into unconsciousness.

The other pig gave a crazed squeal and tried to flee, but the young man who had been lying on the ground quickly reached toward his back and pulled out his bow. His sapphire eyes sparkled as the supple wood creaked under the force of his draw. He exhaled slightly and fired. *Fwsh!* The sky-blue arrow flew toward

its target and penetrated the swamp pig's belly just as it reared up to dive down under the mud. The stuck pig fell into the mud and floated along its surface for a while, before a flurry of bright-red mushrooms burst to life with a *Gaboom!* all across the animal's body.

The boy remained in his firing posture for a few seconds, then cleared his nose with a sniffle and wiped the mud off his panda-like face, smiling brightly.

"All right! Two of them!"

It was several days after they left the Weeping Valley, and the end of their long, arduous journey was almost in sight. Compared to when he first left Imihama, Milo's growth was remarkable. He had shown an excellent aptitude in archery, crab riding, and survival skills. When combined with his existing medical skills, Milo was quickly becoming a first-rate Mushroom Keeper.

"...These should be quite nutritious. We've had nothing to eat but veggies lately..."

Milo tied up the two swamp pigs with rope and dragged them back to the traveler's lodge where he and Bisco were staying, excited for his partner to finally have something decent to eat.

Bisco's wounds were bad.

It was hard to tell just from looking, as Bisco was quite good at hiding the pain, but his battles were starting to take their toll. During his fight with the Pipe Snake, he had taken a hit for Milo, and the snake's slow-acting venom was finally beginning to take effect. On top of that, he had Kurokawa's parting gift to deal with. Even after Milo removed the bullet, the Rust continued to eat away at his skin surrounding the wound, and it was abundantly clear to Milo just how much pain Bisco was in every time he moved.

Bisco wolfed down the meals Milo cooked with glee, but in the night, he would wake up to sneak outside and vomit profusely. Though he tried to hide it from Milo, Milo's senses had been trained by the best, and for better or worse it was hard to hide anything from him anymore. The sight of Bisco's suffering was like a knife in Milo's gut, and he cursed his lack of ability to help ease his partner's pain.

He must be so bored. I don't think we should set off yet, though.

Since leaving the Weeping Valley, Milo had taken on all of Bisco's usual tasks, from hunting, to checking the safety of camp, to looking after Actagawa, on top of tending to Bisco's wounds four times a day. The stress of not being allowed to do anything was starting to get to Bisco, so Milo had decided to teach him the subject Jabi had given up on: how to brew medicine. Bisco protested like a child asked to practice their multiplication tables, but after Milo told him it was a skill that all great Mushroom Keepers possessed, Bisco suddenly seemed to find new interest in the idea. Another thing Milo had learned was how to deal with him. And Bisco was quite proficient with mushrooms, though he preferred to use them offensively. He would have no trouble learning the recipe for preparing the Rust-Eater medicine. (Just so long as Milo wrote it down in simple words so he could understand.)

"I'm back, Bisco! I caught two pigs today!"

Putting on his best smile, Milo burst through the cabin door. However, his partner wasn't there. He checked all the rooms, including the outhouse and the storeroom, but Bisco was nowhere to be found.

...Don't tell me he waited until I was gone...!

Milo felt his blood run cold. Letting the pigs fall to the ground, he dashed out the front door and headed toward the swamp, when...

"Hey, where ya goin'? Two's more than enough, ain't it?"

"...Bisco!"

Bisco appeared, rather anticlimactically, riding on Actagawa's back. Meanwhile, Actagawa himself had a somewhat irritable air about him. Having spent so long with him by now, Milo was beginning to be able to tell.

"He went off on his own 'cause he saw a girl crab he liked," Bisco said with a chuckle, patting Actagawa on the head. "But she shot him down 'cause he doesn't have his big claw anymore. Heh-heh-heh, chin up, soldier! Size isn't everything, remember?"

At this, Actagawa reached up with his great—well, medium-sized—claw, lifted Bisco off the saddle, and flung him into a nearby pile of mud. Bisco stood up,

laughing, and wiped himself down, only to see Milo glaring at him, a dead serious expression on his face.

“I said you were to stay in bed! Why aren’t you listening to anything I say?”

“Wh-what’s the big deal? I couldn’t help it. Actagawa went off on his own. Besides, you try doing science experiments like that for three or four hours. My brain’s gonna rot before my body does.”

“...I was worried about you, Bisco,” said Milo, peering up at him with a slightly bitter look in his eyes. “I thought you’d gone away somewhere...”

“Huh?”

At that point, Actagawa lumbered away, visibly upset, and Bisco hurried after him.

“Come back here, Bisco! Are you going off hunting again?”

“Well, we have to feed Actagawa, or he’ll be sulky all night! I’m just gonna catch him some fish!”

“No! Bisco, come back!”

“I’ll only be gone ten minutes! It’ll take you that long to cook the pork, right? I’ll let you handle the skinning, ’cause I don’t like doing that.”

Then Bisco left, as if completely unaware of how much Milo was worrying over him. He leaped aboard the giant crab’s saddle, took the reins, and steered him expertly through the swamp.

“...Gr... Gnh... Bisco, you idiot...”

Milo watched Bisco leave. His lips trembling, he wiped the tears from the corners of his eyes. Then he set about preparing their supper, solidifying all the rules by which he would give Bisco the cold shoulder upon his return.

There were no other travelers at the lodge. A flashing television set illuminated one corner of the cabin, playing the only channel available this far northeast. Milo sat pulling strips of pig flesh with his knife, only half watching. On the screen, a gray cartoon cat chased a small brown mouse. Alas, the poor cat had fallen for one of the mouse’s crafty schemes and was now screaming in agony, its tail caught in a mousetrap. Milo, considering himself more of a cat

lover, reached to turn it off, when all of a sudden there was a burst of static, and the image on the screen changed.

“Ahem, testing, testing. It’s peaking; turn it down. You idiot, you’re overexposing it. If you don’t know how to do it right, just set it to automatic... Yes, like that. Amateurs. Ahem. This is an official broadcast of the Imihama Prefectural Bureau.”

Milo’s hand froze as he recognized the calm, chilling voice of Governor Kurokawa.

“This is my regular message to the criminals Bisco Akaboshi and Milo Nekoyanagi. I’m pretty sure you’re in the northeastern broadcast area... I just hope you’re watching.”

Kurokawa stood in the center of the screen and coughed as he straightened his necktie.

“My dear Milo. Your sister may be a thing of beauty, but she’s got no brains. She never guessed I might be keeping tabs on the old man. What a fight she put up. Alas, her skills with the staff came to naught once I threatened to shoot my hostage. See for yourself.”

Kurokawa wheeled out a giant crucifix in front of the camera. Milo’s eyes were drawn to the human figure silhouetted there, strapped to it, their throat issuing forth a voiceless, guttural groan.

“One of the strange things about fools is that they often win fights. Well, that must make your sister a very foolish fool, indeed. I thought for sure she was going to crack my skull wide open, but for some reason, she opted to spare the life of the senile old Mushroom Keeper she so detested... Hey. Don’t you have something to say?”

Kurokawa brought his microphone close to her, but Pawoo turned her face away. There was blood dripping from the corners of her mouth, and her fingernails had all been pulled out. The sight was hard to stomach. The traces of torture were plain to see across her entire body.

“What’s that? Nothing? That’s strange. I could have sworn there was something...”

Kurokawa turned and pulled a red-hot branding iron from out of a nearby bonecoal stove. Then, without hesitation or warning, he thrust it into the skin at the side of Pawoo's hip, just above her underwear.

"Aaaaaaaaghhh!"

Pawoo's flesh sizzled, and she let out a scream. A sound that made Milo feel like he was being stabbed in the heart. Kurokawa showed no trace of emotion whatsoever and asked her in his usual bored tone:

"Is there really nothing you have to say? I'm sure there was. Remember it for me, won't you?"

"Mi...lo...!"

"Ah, thank goodness, there was."

"Take Akaboshi...and run! Leave Jabi to me! I'll get him out of here! Forget about me! Stay with Akaboshi! He'll... He'll... Graaaaaaghhh! Aaaaagh!"

"Stick to the script, sweetheart. No improvising."

"Kurokawa's a piece of shit! Imihama's a den of corruption! You two stay far away from this place!"

"I told you to zip it. Look, just do this by the book. I really don't want to have to mess up that pretty little face of yours."

As he said this, Kurokawa brought the iron closer and closer to Pawoo's cheek. Pawoo let out a couple ragged breaths without looking up, and then the corners of her mouth twisted up into a smile, and she began to chuckle.

"Stick to the script, you say? Ha! You really think Akaboshi will just curl up and die because it's in your script? You can't even handle one Rust-eaten woman."

"...If you don't keep your mouth shut..."

"It's you who should start running, Kurokawa."

Pawoo leveled her gaze, her fierce eyes challenging his own.

"Akaboshi is strong. Your schemes won't be enough to save you this time."

"That's enough out of you, you little bitch! Die, dieee!"

Kurokawa flew into a rage. For an uncomfortably long time, there were only the dull sounds of his fists raining down on her body. Then, at last, he was finished, and she hung limply from the cross. A pathetic groan was all she could muster. Kurokawa steadied his breathing and, hands still shaking, snatched up a bottle of pills and shook it into his mouth. After crunching them between his teeth and washing them down with a glass of water, he at last recomposed himself.

“Haah... Haah... What a detestable woman. She’s going to give me nightmares, talking like that... Ah, look at all this blood. This suit is Armani, you know... In any case, you see what I’ve had to deal with. Rest assured, she never gave up your location...or that of the real Rust-Eater, either.”

Kurokawa turned toward the camera once more, producing an orange vial and flicking it with his fingernail.

“What a marvelous medicine... You knew this whole time, didn’t you, Nekoyanagi? That poor excuse for a mushroom can’t possibly be the legendary Rust-Eater...”

Here Kurokawa’s voice deepened, and he brought his jet-black eyes right up to the camera and muttered.

“The last Sunday of this month is a very special day, indeed. For that day, I will ensure your sister meets a most untimely end. These are my demands. One: Reveal to me the truth of the Rust-Eater. Two: Hand over the redheaded monkey. I’ll trade both of those for your sister... Ah, I’ll even throw in my manga collection. Look at this, I’ve got Phoenix, even Slam Dunk... Oh? I only have up to Volume 9 of that. Wait, that’s all? That’s no good...”

“Anyway, you get the idea. The next date with your partner will be to Shimobuki Garrison. And do hurry. I’ll be waiting, and there’s very little to do out there. Until you show up, I’m just going to have to keep making these announcements.

“See you then. Ciao.”

“Milo! Sorry about that. Actagawa ate a bunch of eels, and he’s feelin’ lots better now. I think he probably wants some of the pork as well. That okay?”

“Oh, hey, Bisco,” came the unnaturally calm voice from within the cabin. “Of course. I’ll dish some up for him, too.”

“...?”

Bisco had come back expecting to have to apologize to Milo for hurting his feelings, so he was surprised to find him oddly receptive. Although Milo’s behavior raised suspicion, the scent of supper wafting outside drew Bisco in and made him soon forget his misgivings.

“Ooh, boiled pork tonight?”

“Yeah. I didn’t want to upset your stomach, so I tried to cut out the fatty bits as best as I could.”

“But you love the fatty bits! You didn’t have to do that for—”

Then, at last, Bisco looked up at Milo and stopped. He was deathly pale.

“...Hmm? What’s up with you?” he asked. He narrowed his eyes at Milo’s awkward smile, his trembling body, his face that now seemed whiter than ever. Then he took a sip of his broth and immediately spat it out onto the floor.

“Sleepshrooms,” he said, casting Milo a terrifying glare, and yet he couldn’t hide his concern. “What’s wrong? Why would you do something like this?”

“Bisco. Please...listen to me.”

“It’s Pawoo, isn’t it?”

It was only at times like this that Bisco was so perceptive to how Milo felt. It was like a curse.

“He did something to her, didn’t he? That’s why you look so pale. Is he tryin’

to bait us?”

Milo didn't answer. He simply looked down at his bowl. But his silence told Bisco all he needed to know, and he stood up and pulled on his cloak.

“He must be nearby, which means he's at Shimobuki Garrison. Well, I'm gonna go make him regret picking a fight with us. For every scratch he gave to your sister, I'll drive an arrow into that tongue he likes to wag so much.”

“No! Bisco, please, don't go!”

“What's gotten into you, Milo? Your sister's in danger! This is no time to be scared!”

“No, I'm telling *you* not to go!”

A single gust of wind ruffled their cloaks as they stood there outside the cabin. Bisco's eyes were wide with surprise.

Milo looked down at his feet. “I'm a doctor, remember?! I know how much pain you've been in lately. I know about your injuries. I know about the venom that's working its way through your body. I know your stomach is rusted up, and it's stopping you from eating. And I know that your eyes have gotten so bad that you can't even see what you're shooting at anymore. I know everything.”

“...”

“You're the one who needs looking after the most! More than Pawoo, more than Jabi. You shouldn't even be able to stand. If you go in there... Bisco, you're not going to come back!”

“So what?! It's my life, and I can live it how I want! Why is it any of your business?!”

“Because you're my friend!” The words tore their way out of Milo's throat like a sudden blast of wind. Bisco was left shaking. “Of course it's my business. How could it not be?” His voice trembled, and the tears streamed down his face and stained the ground by his feet. “You're my best friend, Bisco. I don't want you to die... How can you possibly not understand that?!”

A breeze blew once more. Bisco closed his eyes, let out a deep breath, and looked at Milo again with conviction.

“My reason’s the same as yours, Milo,” he said, his voice growing harsh. “I don’t want you to die, either.”

“Bisco!”

“People need you, Milo. Way more than they need me. Let’s keep it that way, ‘kay?”

Bisco gave one last look back.

“If either of us has to die, it’s gonna be me. You stay here... I’ll be right back.”

“Bisco.”

A chill gently caressed the hairs at the back of Bisco’s neck. He turned around to see Milo standing there, his bow drawn. His blue eyes burned with a determination that matched Bisco’s own. No fear, no doubt. As if he were a soldier prepared to lay down his life in battle.

“You really wanna do this, Milo...?”

“I can’t let you go, Bisco. Even if it costs me everything.”

“You know better than anyone how strong I am,” Bisco said, the fire in his eyes growing gradually brighter until he became the Man-Eating Redcap once more. “And you know what it means to raise your bow against me.”

“I do.”

Milo remained resolute in the face of the incarnation of wrath before him. He glared back with hate of his own.

“But one thing you *didn’t* teach me was how to lose to a dead man,” he said.

Bisco’s eyes snapped open, and the battle began.

Fwsh! Shoo!

The two arrows collided in midair, the arrowheads shattering against each other. The pair wheeled around, loosing arrow after arrow, but they continued to crash into each other time and time again. Then they both leaped into melee range, their blades drawn, and clashed. Bisco swung his bow like a staff, but Milo stepped in close with his own bow and drove it into Bisco’s gut.

“Grh...!”

Now for the numbskull...

Milo pressed the attack with his poisoned blade, but Bisco ducked and weaved with incredible speed, before throwing his head forward, bashing Milo in the face.

“Gah... Ah!”

“You’re never gonna beat me!” Bisco said with ragged breath. “Just give up and— Gragh!”

Milo shut him up with a blow to the mouth. As Bisco reeled, Milo scowled at him, blood from his crushed nose splattered across his face.

“You’re the one who needs to give up, Bisco!” he said.

“Make me, asshole!”

Bisco’s haymaker landed on the side of Milo’s face, and he staggered back but then gathered himself and launched a fist into Bisco’s nose. They swung at each other, pummeling each other’s faces, falling over into the mud that soon became splattered with their blood.

Milo straddled Bisco and began beating him, but Bisco easily dislodged his light body with a kick. Both of them staggered to their feet in the mud, staring down each other’s blood-soaked faces. No matter how much Bisco hurt him, Milo kept coming back for more. If anything, he was even more determined now than ever, and Bisco started to feel a passion welling up inside himself as well.

“I... I won’t let you go!” shouted Milo.

“God dammit...”

Milo’s blue eyes glinted as he raised his poisoned blade and flew toward Bisco with a yell. Bisco was too exhausted to hold back, and his instincts overtook his rational mind. He spun his body around like a typhoon, with an incredible agility completely at odds with his injuries. His roundhouse kick struck Milo in the side, knocking him to the ground.

“Gah... Agh! Gah!”

Shit!

He had felt Milo's ribs crack. The shock brought Bisco back to his senses, and he rushed over to help Milo up.

"Milo!"

"Rgh... I'm sorry, Bisco..."

"Don't apologize... You were right. Come on; we can go together—"

"I'm sorry, Bisco. I'm so, so sorry...!"

There was a sharp pain in the back of Bisco's neck. Before he could even register what had just happened, he slumped to his knees as an irresistible drowsiness overwhelmed him.

"Mi...lo..."

Before him, he saw the beautiful face of his partner beaten half to a pulp. He was crying, an empty syringe in his hand.

But Bisco could no longer hear what he was saying.

Don't make that face, he wanted to say, but his mouth did not move, and soon the encroaching darkness obliterated what was left of Bisco's conscious mind.

As part of what the city of Imihama called development aid, a few members of the Vigilante Corps were selected each year to go and complete a three-to-five-year deployment at Shimobuki Garrison. Of course, Shimobuki had no say in the matter, and as for the vigilantes, being exiled to the land of perpetual frost was one of the worst punishments imaginable.

There wasn't much to it. Two shoddily built, concrete barracks that could fit about twenty men each, an armory, a food storehouse, and in the center of it all, a slightly taller building that served as the main office, flanked by a pair of barely functional anti-aircraft guns.

In one room of the office building, lit by the orange glow of a bonecoal furnace, two men were sitting at a table scattered with cards of some kind.

"All right. Here's what I'll do. I'll attack your life points directly with *Hellfire Hammer*. Heh. Well? How will you block?"

"I'm afraid I lose."

"Hey now, that can't be right! Let me see those... Look, you have a *Brass Shield* in your hand! You can block with that, then on your next turn, use *Verdant Tree Sprout*..."

"I'm afraid I lose."

"Forget it; you're not listening to me."

Kurokawa threw his cards down on the table before kicking his opponent to the ground. There was something very strange about the bodyguard's appearance. Countless long, thin mushrooms grew out of his eyes, ears, and the top of his head. In other words, the man was quite dead, and any words out of his mouth were merely put there by the Governor.

"I can't stand this guy anymore. What's the world coming to if you can't find

time to have a little fun? ...Hey, is there anyone else who wants to play a game with me? Anything but Jenga. I'm terrible at that."

Then, as the furnace's flames flickered, Kurokawa's eyes were drawn to a silhouette standing in the doorway, and his face lit up.

"There you are; I've been waiting for you! Do you know how to play *Calamity Jade*? Don't worry, I've got two decks, so you can use one of—"

"Where are you hiding Pawoo?!"

Sky-blue hair and a black mark on the left side of his face. Milo's beautiful blue eyes burned with vengeful flames, and he pointed his fully drawn bow unwaveringly at Kurokawa's head.

...*Hmm.*

Kurokawa examined Milo's face, trying to work out if he really was the same boy doctor he once knew. Then his lips twisted into a grin.

"That hooligan's taken quite a liking to you, Nekoyanagi. And you certainly look the part."

"You'll regret underestimating me...!"

"Whoa, whoa, hold on. Don't do anything hasty. I appreciate that you're concerned, but this is hardly fair. Show me what I asked you to bring first, then I'll release your sister. That's how these things usually go, isn't it?"

Milo glared back without lowering his bow, before replying.

"...If you want me to show you the secret of the Rust-Eater, you'll have to bring me some."

"Of course, my dear doctor. At once. You, there. Bring the goods."

At his word, a man in a suit brought over a handful of Rust-Eater mushrooms. Their surfaces were dull, their true power hidden. Keeping one eye on the bodyguards surrounding him, Milo approached the mushrooms and pulled from his pocket a test tube filled with white spores, to which he added a few drops of red liquid.

"...By itself," he said, "the Rust-Eater is in a dormant state. It needs to be

mixed with another substance to unlock its true potential.”

“I see. Brilliant work, Doctor. And the liquid in that vial is...?”

Milo didn’t answer. A few seconds passed, then suddenly from the test tube in Milo’s hands came a strong smell of burning flesh.

“...?! He’s using a mushroom technique! Kill him!”

A white smoke poured out of the test tube and filled the room. Milo leaped up just as the bodyguards dived in to grab him and downed them all with a few shots from his bow.

“Just when did you learn the ways of the Mushroom Keepers, good doctor?”

“I told you not to underestimate me, Kurokawa...! You’re going to die here!”

Milo’s technique had filled the air with numbshroom spores, which had then sprouted. Milo himself had created something of an antidote and taken it ahead of time. It was his ultimate technique as both a doctor and a Mushroom Keeper.

Not long after the men in black inhaled the smoke, white mushrooms started growing out of their ears and nostrils, and they fell to the ground, convulsing. The few who managed to resist the poison didn’t last much longer, as Milo swung his bow and knocked them all to the floor, where they lay, unmoving.

“After all I’ve done for you,” roared Kurokawa. “*This* is how you repay me?!”

“Oh, I’m repaying you, all right. For Pawoo, for Plum, and for Bisco, too!”

Kurokawa unsteadily raised his pistol, but the numbshroom-soaked blade of Milo’s dagger knocked it clean out of his hands. The return swing sliced right through Kurokawa’s suit, causing him to howl in pain and splattering the pale skin of Milo’s face with fresh blood. As two suits ran up from behind to protect Kurokawa, Milo spun around and cut them down. Then, seeing that that was the last of them, he talked over his shoulder with ragged breaths.

“The numbshroom poison will soon reach your heart. I’m the only one who can save you. If you don’t let Pawoo and Jabi go—”

Suddenly, Milo felt a sharp pain in his chest and looked down to see something hard piercing his back and sticking out of his right lung.

...?

Something warm rose into his throat, filling his mouth. Milo dropped to his knees, and a gush of crimson burst through his lips and splattered onto the floor.

An...arrow...?

Milo's thoughts were ravaged by pain as he stared at the arrowhead protruding from his chest. Every time he coughed, more blood spilled from his mouth, staining the ground red.

"You're not the first person to think of mixing numbsrooms with boomshrooms like that, but no one's ever actually done it before. Because not even a gas mask can protect you from the adverse effects."

"Kah... Hah..."

"So you made yourself a vaccine? Very impressive, Nekoyanagi. Thank goodness I did the *same thing*...all those years ago. Otherwise, I shudder to think what would have happened. I might have been killed not by Akaboshi, but you..."

Kurokawa wheeled around in front of Milo, keeping his distance. Milo took out a syringe filled with a purple liquid and jabbed it into his own neck, causing him to writhe on the ground as his wounds began closing.

"...Why...do you...know how...to use mushrooms...?!"

Milo summoned all his strength to spit out the words. Looking up, he saw that in Kurokawa's hands was a jet-black bow. The governor fished through his quiver for another arrow and nocked it on the string before aiming at Milo.

"Why? Isn't it obvious?"

Kurokawa narrowed his pitch-black eyes as he grinned.

"Because I was once a Mushroom Keeper, too."

As he loosed his arrow, Milo deflected it with his knife, then leaped up into the air. Spinning around like a whirlwind, his knife shot toward Kurokawa...

...and stopped, as if frozen, a hair's breadth from his throat. As sweat and

blood dripped down Milo's chin, he tried with all his might to move his hand the final bit of the way, but it was no use.

...Some sort...of poison...!

"There's a mushroom called the puppetshroom," said Kurokawa matter-of-factly, his stone-cold eyes meeting Milo's rage-filled glare. "I'm sure you can guess how it earned its name. The fungus takes root in your muscles, and when the microchip in my brain transmits a signal, it responds accordingly, moving your arms and legs...just like a toy."

Kurokawa calmly produced some sort of device and started playing with it. As he did, Milo slowly lowered his hand, before turning the point of the blade toward his own throat. As the tip pressed into his skin, a small line of blood dribbled down.

"Urgh... Argh...!"

"Pretty impressive, wouldn't you say? Nobody else seems to think so... This is what I used to control all those men of mine lying at your feet, but the Mushroom Keepers never acknowledged it. They called it heresy."

Kurokawa waved the device in Milo's direction and started pacing around the room like he was thinking about something. For a while, the only sounds in the room were the bonecoal furnace and Milo's short, ragged breaths.

"...Nekoyanagi." Suddenly, Kurokawa took Milo by the chin and stared into his eyes. "I respect you; I really do. So I'm going to be frank. To be completely honest with you, I couldn't care less about the Rust-Eater's power. I just want to make sure I have it all to myself... Do you know what the central government is counting on to balance its books?"

"...Grr."

"Exactly. The Rust medicine. As long as that exists, then people have a reason to go on. The world keeps turning, and the money keeps flowing. Now, imagine if you were to bring those wretched people their salvation... Then my cushy lifestyle would be in jeopardy, you see?"

"You...monster...!"

“Ah, good to see you’ve still got some life in you. Otherwise, things would get very boring.” Kurokawa chuckled as he watched Milo fight back the pain and focus his anger. “Once I have the true Rust-Eater, I won’t just be another useful pawn to them. It’ll give Imihama the bargaining chip I need to negotiate on even terms with the government... Oh, listen to me going on and on about work. I can’t imagine you’re the slightest bit interested, are you? Tell you what. I’ll forget about Akaboshi for the time being. Just tell me how to awaken the Rust-Eater.”

“You’re going to make sure there’s none left...!”

“Just answer the question, Nekoyanagi, or I’ll feed you to the pigs!”

Milo gritted his teeth, suppressed his trembling, and focused all his hate on Kurokawa. Though his face was turning pale, he still looked resolute, like he was ready to throw his life away at any moment.

That pushed Kurokawa over the edge.

“That’s the same face your sister made...!” Kurokawa’s expression twisted into a bitter scowl. He took his bow and aimed it squarely at Milo’s head. “Maybe I’ll just have you become another puppet. Perhaps you’ll still be able to talk after the fungus reaches your brain.”

Milo stared at the arrow, his lips pursed. There was nothing he regretted about his life so far, save one thing. He wished he could have seen his friend off in a better way than he did.

Bisco...

Milo closed his eyes, remembering the form of his friend.

Then, *crash!* The wall of the room was ripped open. Kurokawa’s arrow snapped in two, and a heavy arrow embedded itself in the bonecoal furnace. Through the hole torn into the concrete wall, a cold wind began to enter from outside. Both Milo and Kurokawa knew this could be the work of only one man.

“Before you fire one more arrow...” A scarlet-haired individual stepped over the rubble, his cloak billowing in the wind. “...I’ll turn you into a human pincushion. Hand Milo over to me, and maybe having all your teeth knocked out is the worst you’ll get.”

“Bisco... Ngh!”

“Why, if it isn’t our old friend Tuxedo Mask!”

Kurokawa stood interposed between Milo and Bisco, with a look of utter delight, excitement, and fear in equal measure, the likes of which Milo had never seen.

“You’re looking rather pale today, Akaboshi. The poison must be getting bad. I can tell from here.”

“So what? You think a wounded shark can’t swallow a sardine in one bite?”

Wholly unconcerned, Bisco cracked his neck. It was true that his face was a little pale, but the unfading jade-green glint in his eyes made it very hard to believe he had so much poison eating away at his body.

But...! Kurokawa’s eyes turned up in excitement. “As you are now, I may be able to defeat you, the Mushroom Keepers’ brightest star, face-to-face...!”

“What’s up with those bags under your eyes? You losin’ sleep over me, old man?” Bisco gave an indomitable smile. “Doesn’t bother me, I guess. Hate me all you like. But I’ll have forgotten about you by tomorrow.”

“Grr...!” growled Kurokawa. Bisco didn’t crack, even seeing his partner held hostage. Kurokawa thought he could gain the upper hand, but now that his gambit had failed, he was starting to feel the fear get to him.

As sweat dripped down his face, he unleashed the words he had been holding on to in anticipation of this very moment. “What if I told you,” he said, “that I’m the reason the Mushroom Keepers have been so reviled for the last ten years? I’m the reason all of Japan thinks mushrooms cause the Rust. I sold out the Mushroom Keepers to the government. I’m the one trampling all over you just so I can have something nice to eat! Would you be more interested in getting to know me *then*, Akaboshi?!”

Milo could do nothing but watch the exchange. He felt an icy grip on his heart. He turned to Bisco. His face was completely unchanged. After a short pause, he sniffed as the cold wind blew through the open wall, then replied in a somewhat nasally voice:

“Huh. Thanks for telling me that.” He inclined his head and shot Kurokawa a smirk, baring his gleaming canines. “Guess my revenge just kinda fell into my lap.”

“...I’ll mount your head on my wall, Akaboshiii!”

Before Bisco even finished talking, Kurokawa aimed his bow at him, but Bisco’s bow was faster. His arrow tore a vacuum through the air like a drill, ripping Kurokawa’s left arm clean off and breaking through the far wall.

“Grh... Ahhh! Graaagh!”

“Does that make you feel better, Kurokawa? Still think you can beat me, huh?! Well?!”

“Bisco, get out of the way!”

A sharp pain suddenly shot through Bisco’s leg. He had leaped back at Milo’s warning, but it was as if the arrow predicted his movement.

“Ah... Wah... Waaaaaaahhh!”

Milo screamed as if all the world’s horrors had descended upon him. For it was none other than his own arrow that was embedded in Bisco’s thigh.

The puppetshroom...!

Bisco wasn’t ordinarily one to quail at a single arrow, and he hurried to correct his posture, but a strange feeling in his right leg caused it to buckle, and he fell to one knee. That was when a second arrow landed with a thud in Bisco’s other thigh.

Milo’s strangled scream filled the room. Behind him, Kurokawa unsteadily rose to his feet, using Milo as a human shield.

“How utterly, ridiculously strong you are, Akaboshi,” he said, gasping for breath, gripping his armless stump. “I got lucky this time... If that hadn’t been a prosthetic arm, I’d be dead right now.”

“What did you hit me with, asshole...?!”

“Come now, Akaboshi. You must be familiar with it by now,” said Kurokawa, positioning himself carefully behind Milo’s body. “It’s a Rust arrow. An arrow

made using concentrated essence from the Rust Wind. They're about as expensive as bullets but worth every penny. Besides, I have a feeling my puppetshrooms aren't going to be quite as effective on you."



The Rust was already spreading across Bisco's thighs and knees, turning clothes and skin alike into cold, unfeeling metal. Bisco could no longer even stand, and with Milo in the way, he couldn't fire at Kurokawa, either.

"Oooh... Look at your eyes, so scary. Who knows what you'll try next? Perhaps we should finish him off now, Milo. Hmm... Let's aim for his stomach next."

"Waaaah! Stop! Stop; don't make me do it! Nooo! I'm begging you! Don't make me shoot him...!"

Kurokawa fiddled with his device, and Milo drew his bow, displaying the beautiful form that Bisco had taught him. The tip of his arrow was coated in pitch-black rust that wriggled and gave off a foul stench.

"Now, now, Nekoyanagi. Don't throw a tantrum. Is that how you ask for a favor? What do we say?"

"P-please don't make me shoot him, Mr. Kurokawa...!"

"Say 'Pwetty pwease, Master, don't make me do it!'"

"Hrgh...! Hkh...! P...pwet—"

"Time's up."

Pchew! Milo's bowstring snapped, and the arrow lodged itself in Bisco's belly, where the Rust was already the most serious. Bisco choked on his blood, splattering it even as far as Milo's face, where it mixed with his tears.

"W...weeh...! Weeeh...!"

"Something the matter? Trying to bite off your own tongue? I'm afraid I can't let you do that. How could you think about killing yourself now, Nekoyanagi? Look at Akaboshi; he's fighting so hard to stay alive."

"Please... Don't kill him. You can do whatever you want to me. Mash me up and feed me to the pigs; I don't care. Just don't kill Bisco...please...!"

"If that's what you want, then you know what you have to do, Nekoyanagi. Tell me the secret of the Rust-Eater."

"Milo...! Don't tell him!"

"Tell me, Nekoyanagi! Or it'll be his head next!"

Milo's arms pulled his bowstring taut. Fresh tears dribbled down his stained cheeks.

"...The blood...of a Mushroom Keeper."

"Milo!"

"Mix the blood of a genuine Mushroom Keeper...with the Rust-Eater...using the Garcube method... Then...the Rust-Eater will awaken to its true potential... The power to disintegrate the Rust entirely..."

"Well done."

When Milo saw Bisco hang his head and bite his lip, he cried once more. This time, they were tears of shame. Milo had shed more tears in these last few minutes than his kind, gentle heart could bear over a lifetime.

"Now then, Nekoyanagi..."

Kurokawa stepped to Milo's side, examining his expression, and spoke with a slightly embarrassed tone.

"You know what happens now, don't you? I mean, I can't just let you two live, can I? I'd have to be mad to let loose such dangerous individuals."

"Hrh... Hkh...!"

"I'm glad you understand. As my gift to you, Nekoyanagi, I'll let you put Akaboshi out of his misery. Have him killed by his partner's very hand. What a beautiful, tragic scene, like something out of a movie. Now, draw your bow..."

Milo looked at Bisco with cloudy eyes. Then, his bow creaked as he drew back the black arrow.

His eyes. His eyes were unwavering even as his body was ravaged by the Rust. They still had that same emerald glimmer. Even as Milo's heart was engulfed by despair, those eyes shone with life, warming him.

Milo, they said. Shoot me.

And then a thought flashed into Milo's mind like an electric shock. At the moment when he was all but overcome with despair, the slightest spark of life appeared within him and gave Kurokawa pause.

“Wait... Stop right—”

But Milo released his arrow. *Pchew!* It flew toward the crown of Bisco’s head. And then, at the last second, Bisco reacted, perfectly in time with his partner’s actions. Gripping the arrowhead between his teeth, he twisted around, preserving its momentum, and hurled it back like a boomerang toward Kurokawa. The black rust-covered arrow struck him in the right eye, and his entire temple was blown out.

“!!?? Graargh! Aaargh! Aaaaaagh!”

Kurokawa pressed his hand to his eye to hold back the torrent of blood, but even now he would not let go of the device in his hand. An indignant roar worked its way out of his throat as he jabbed his thumb into the button, and Milo dropped his bow. He brought his knife toward his own neck, the point pressing into the skin, ready to tear it open.

“Milo!”

At that moment, a streak of blinding light punched clean through the device in Kurokawa’s hand. As he turned to flee, three more flashes of light pinned him to the ground by his suit. Then the pure-white arrows burst into beautiful mushrooms, filling Kurokawa’s vision.

“Those arrows...!”

“Get outta here, Bisco! His goons’re coming to surround this place!”

A figure leaped into the room. When Bisco saw who it was, his cloak flapping in the wind, he let out a shout.

“Jabi!”

Jabi ran up to Milo and stabbed him with a small medicinal arrow he had prepared. Immediately, the nightmare curse of the puppetshrooms was broken, and he fell to the floor as if his strings were cut.

“Prhaah! Haah...! Haah...! Th-thank you so much, Jabi!”

“Kurokawa’s useless without his tricks... That’s why his techniques will never match mine. Hyo-ho-ho!” Jabi laughed with a toothless grin.

“Jabi! What about Pawoo?” asked Milo. “I can’t find her anywhere! Do you

have any idea?"

"Of course you can't, boy. That's because I've already rescued her! Kurokawa's still just a young lad if he thinks I can't escape his puppet strings!" As Jabi spoke, he looked down at the marks on Bisco's legs and frowned. "But the Rust I can't do anything about. Bisco's legs are his wings. Take him, boy, and make sure he gets out of here."

"Okay!"

"You tellin' us to run away again? Jabi, you old idiot! What're you gonna do this time?!"

Jabi just turned his beady eyes toward the pair as he nocked his next arrow and grinned.

"Someone's gotta cover your escape! I'll be right behind ya. Besides..." The room was suddenly swarming with Kurokawa's bodyguards as they climbed out of vents and up through the floorboards like zombies, slowly closing in on the three of them. "I gotta give Kurokawa my regards. What kind o' father turns a blind eye when someone hurts his own son?"

"Jabi!"

"Go!" he shouted, and with the speed of the monkey king, he leaped across the room, letting loose a burst of arrows that hit every one of the suited men square in the chest.

Milo stuffed Bisco under his arm, ignoring his protests, before running out of the room into the blizzard outside. The few guards who escaped Jabi's onslaught turned and simultaneously fired their crossbows at Milo as he fled. One of their bolts hit Bisco, wounding him in the shoulder and rusting his skin in almost no time at all. Milo adjusted his grip on Bisco and set off even faster. A couple more bolts landed in his back, but he barely even felt the pain. Crying bitter tears, he gritted his teeth and pressed on through the snow.

Then a huge orange carapace burst out of the snow and struck the ground with a swing of his hammer-like claw, tossing Kurokawa's bodyguards up into the air like pancakes. Through ragged breaths, Milo pushed Bisco up onto Actagawa's saddle, before using the last of his strength to haul himself up as

well. Once feeling that both of his companions were safely aboard, Actagawa dashed off through the snow, breaking free of the suits who had started to climb up onto him.

“...Bisco... Your arm...”

“You goddamn idiot. You’ve got it way worse than me. Try not to talk... I’ll take care of it for you.”

Bisco’s wounds were one thing, but Milo was starting to look like a human pincushion. Luckily, the bodyguards’ crossbows had been rather weak, but they were laced with poison, and already the Rust would be working its way through Milo’s body, replacing his beautiful pale skin with unforgiving metal.

“Here, this is a mintshroom. Chew it; don’t swallow...”

“Bisco...”

“What is it? Does it hurt?”

Bisco brushed snow off Milo’s sky-blue hair. The boy’s frozen lips trembled and managed to say just one thing.

“Please don’t die...”

Bisco smiled. For whatever reason, tears began spilling down his face. The night was dark, and it would still be several hours before sunrise.

The crackling bonfire cast flickering shadows across Milo's sleeping face. He rolled over toward the warm flames, before suddenly sitting bolt upright.

"Hey, stay in bed! I've only just wrapped those bandages!"

"B-Bisco? Are you there? Where are you? Ah— Oh...my eyes... I..."

Though Milo's eyes were wide open, his vision was filled with white. He trembled in fear and covered his face. Suddenly, a rough hand landed on his shoulder and gently laid him back down. Milo grabbed tightly onto that hand for dear life.

"Bisco... I'm sorry... I can't see... I think I'm blind..."

"Quit shaking, idiot. It's just the Rust. Once you get your medicine, it'll be all gone."

"The cure? You have the cure...?"

Bisco took Milo's pale arm in his hand and felt for his pulse. Then he took out a syringe and injected it into the vein. Milo winced as the liquid flowed into him, before eventually relaxing and letting his body weight fall into Bisco's arms.

"Swiped 'em from Kurokawa while we were fightin'. Really was as easy to make as you said... Looks like your lessons weren't for nothin'."

"You made it for me? Wow, Bisco...! But...what about you? Oh no... Bisco, you need to have yours first..." Milo suddenly started to wave his arms, feeling through the air. Bisco grabbed his hand and held it.

"I took care of mine already. You worry too much."

"Really?"

Bisco guided Milo's hand to his neck. Feeling the soft, warm skin, Milo breathed a sigh of relief. Bisco let go of his hand, making sure not to let him

touch the rusted-up metal of his shoulder.

There was no second cure. The only Rust-Eater mushrooms Bisco could find were those that Kurokawa had already turned into Rust arrows, and in any case, Milo's beloved mixing machine was hit with a stray bolt and destroyed during the escape. The cure he had given to Milo, to save the life of his partner, was none other than the one he had received from Pawoo.

As Bisco stood up to gather more firewood, Milo grabbed his sleeve with surprising strength. He turned to see Milo clinging to him with both hands, a disappointed look on his face.

"You should be nicer to me while I'm in recovery."

"What else do you want? I pulled the arrows outta ya, bandaged you up..."

"I want you to stay here with me."

Milo pulled Bisco in with uncharacteristic forcefulness, and the two of them leaned against the rough cave wall, listening to nothing but the soft crackle of the bonfire.

"...Are you mad?"

"Why would I be?"

"You must be. I nearly got both of us killed."

"Damn right, you did. We should have both gone together... Can't say I blame you, though."

"You're not mad?"

"Probably would have done the same thing myself. The important thing is: We're both still alive."

"..."

"..."

"I wonder what happened to Jabi."

"That geezer's got the luck of the devil. He'll be just fine... I hope."

"And Pawoo. He said he saved her."

“Yeah. Your sister’s gonna be fine. Nobody can touch her when she’s got her staff.”

“Hmm...”

“...”

“...Are you sure you’re not interested in her, Bisco?”

“Huh?!”

“She’s so pretty... And, Bisco, you like large breasts, don’t you? Well, Pawoo’s are pretty big.”

“Hers are all muscle, I bet. Anyway, I don’t want to deal with her trying to boss me around all the time.”

“No, she’s not like that, Bisco! She’s actually really devoted, family-oriented... You just can’t tell because you don’t have that much experience with girls...”

“Oh, sure! And I bet women just throw themselves at your feet, right?!”

“They do, actually.”

“O-oh.”

“But Pawoo doesn’t go on many dates. You know what she’s like... She can get a bit...clingy. For example, with her last boyfriend...”

“Let me guess, she killed him for cheating on her?”

“No, don’t worry. I managed to save his life.”

“That’s not funny...”

“But you’ll be safe, Bisco. You’d never cheat!”

“If she found out we were having this conversation, I’m pretty sure your head would roll.”

“Ha-ha! I don’t think so, Bisco. She likes you!”

“...Bullshit.”

“I *am* her brother, you know. I can tell that much.”

“...”

“I had a dream...”

“ ...”

“We were all living together. Everyone was so happy. Jabi was there. You and Pawoo, too. We were all on a journey, and we found a nice place to live, so we settled down... Every time we got tired of living in one place, we’d just go and find somewhere else, riding on Actagawa...”

“ ...”

“...I’d love a life like that...”

“ ...”

“...But you’re leaving, aren’t you?”

“ ...”

“You’re going to settle things with Kurokawa.”

“...Yeah. That’s right.”

“I wish I were stronger, so I could fight by your side. That’s what a partner is supposed to be like. I’m not there yet, but I will be. One day...”

“You’re plenty strong. You don’t need to go crazy.”

“I want to become so strong that you have to force yourself to say things like that.”

“Huh?!”

“Heh...!”

“ ...”

“We’re partners. We can go anywhere we want together. Beat anyone. Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do partners stay together forever? Until they die?”

“Yeah.”

“ ...”

“ ... ”

“Hey, Bisco? Are you still there?”

“I’m right here.”

“Could you...hold my hand?”

“Sure.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“Hey, Bisco?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you still there?”

“Yeah.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“...Ngh... Ah...!”

“You need to go to sleep. Don’t force yourself to stay awake.”

“Don’t go, Bisco...”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Bisco...”

“Yeah?”

“...Will you still be here when I wake up?”

“Of course I will.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“...Milo?”

“ ...”

“...I think I finally know how Jabi felt when he was looking after me.

“You came into my life like...like a firework. I shoulda been dead on the streets, like a stray dog. But you gave me a reason to live.

“...I watched over you, helped you grow. And that became my life’s purpose, Milo. When I die, it won’t be in terror and despair. I’ll be thinking about your future. A happy life like that, it’s more than I deserve...

“ ...

“ ...

“...Good-bye.”

Then Bisco let go of Milo’s hand and gently laid him down. Milo was breathing softly, with a face like a baby panda being cuddled by its father. Bisco thought about how fun it might have been to scribble on his face just once, but before the sentimentality became too much to bear, he tore his gaze away and stood up, dragging his creaking leg to the opening of the cave.

The blizzard had subsided. Bisco gave a low whistle, and Actagawa appeared, his orange shell rising up out of a mound of snow.

“Hey, sorry ’bout that. Was just gettin’ the kid to sleep.”

Bisco hauled his body over and slumped onto Actagawa’s side. The giant crab had taken more than a few arrows in the earlier battle, but his hard carapace and natural immunity to the Rust had shrugged off the worst of it, and he was looking a lot healthier than his two companions, at least.

“To be honest... I wanted to leave you behind as well. But look at me, I can’t go anywhere by myself.” Bisco reached up and brushed the snow off Actagawa’s eyes. “Besides, Jabi’s your dad, too. You’d be furious if I told you to stay behind.”

Bisco pressed his cheek to Actagawa’s cold belly and closed his eyes for a moment. Actagawa quietly let him do his thing, before suddenly grabbing his collar between his huge pincers and lifting his brother up into the saddle on his

back.

“Ah-ha-ha! Sorry about that! We’re too tough to die, aren’t we?” Bisco whipped the reins, and the giant crab bravely set off across the snow. Bisco took a look back at the light spilling out of the cave as it gradually got farther and farther away and pressed his cheek into Actagawa’s shell.

“All the times I’ve put my life on the line... I’ve never done it so calmly before.

“Actagawa...I made a friend.

“A friend...”

Then Bisco closed his eyes and let Actagawa carry him gently onward. On the horizon, the first few rays of dawn’s light were beginning to illuminate the fallen snow.

In northeastern Shimobuki, beyond the reach of the blizzards, stretched a vast wasteland. This was the Northern Miyagi Badlands, and it was believed to be the remains of a dried-up lake. The traveling merchants, however, simply called it the Fields of Thirst, and they avoided it at all costs. That wasn't only because the lands were completely desolate and barren, though that was certainly one reason. The more pressing reason that no merchant ever used this land as a shortcut was that it was home to one of the Japanese government's military bases. It was said that if you went near the place, the guards there would use you for target practice.

On the base, a single jeep rolled up to the door of a large facility and stopped. The door of the jeep opened, and an old man was kicked out, face-planting the dirt.

"Hey, hey, watch it. Really now, have you no respect for your elders?" said Kurokawa, exiting the jeep after him and fiddling with the bandages around his right eye. He approached the old man and offered to help him up only for him to swat away Kurokawa's hand and spring to his feet unaided, glaring at him with beady silver eyes.

"Don't touch me. Who knows what kind of heretical spores you'll use on me?"

"Keh-heh." Kurokawa chuckled, and he raised a hand to stop the men in black suits from attacking Jabi in his defense. His hand was good as new after Bisco blasted it off, having been replaced with a shiny new prosthetic that glinted silver in the light.

"I'm glad you're in such high spirits, old man. I do hope you enjoy the little gift I've prepared."

As Jabi walked ahead of Kurokawa, he looked up to see a huge dome-shaped structure that appeared rather out of place in the otherwise brutalist

architecture of the military base. That dome seemed to be where Kurokawa was heading.

What is he planning...?

A sharp kick on his back from one of Kurokawa's bodyguards interrupted Jabi's thoughts. To cover up their creepy, mushroom-plagued heads, the men in black suits were now all wearing equally creepy animal masks such as frogs and sheep. Jabi ran over to the man and gave him a swift kick in the crotch, and he crumpled in agony while Jabi caught up with Kurokawa as if nothing had happened.

"I wish all hostages were like you. Too many of them simply crack under the pressures of the job. It makes things quite a chore."

Walking alongside Jabi, Kurokawa seemed to be in a pleasant mood. An intense heat emanated from the dark facility ahead, and they heard the constant whirring, clunking sound of heavy machinery within. It was difficult to speak over the noise.

"Aren't you curious?" asked Kurokawa. "Don't you want to know why I haven't killed you yet?"

"Because today's Respect for the Elderly Day, I expect."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! What a funny old man you are."

Kurokawa signaled to a guard, who produced a can of grape Fanta. He snatched the can, took four swigs, and tossed it to the ground.

"If that were the case, then that would mean I had to kill you tomorrow. Well, you'll understand soon enough."

A moving platform began to lift the group to a higher floor. When the view opened up, Jabi could see that the dome was filled with a huge, glowing surface that looked like a pool of lava.

A furnace...? Jabi trembled as he strained his eyes to take in the whole sight. *My God...!*

"Thanks to your persecution, I've been able to acquire a considerable supply of the government's anti-Rust medication. But the fact of the matter is: There

just aren't that many people suffering from the Rust anymore." Kurokawa leaned over and whispered in Jabi's ear as he looked on in horror. "Supply outpaces demand. The natural solution, then...is to simply increase demand; isn't that right?"

"You can't mean... That's impossible...!"

"This is where we cook up the Rust."

The corners of Kurokawa's mouth turned up into a smile. Jabi was looking at a crucible of artificial Rust. This entire dome was a breeding ground for humankind's ruin, the enemy of civilization. When Jabi realized that, even his nerves of steel failed him, and he shuddered in disgust.

"What we might call the 'natural' Rust Wind has been fading in strength for some time. And the number of Rust patients keeps on dropping. What would you do, Jabi? What would Toyotomi Hideyoshi say? If the wind doesn't blow, make it blow."

"You're *creating* Rust? Manufacturin' a new Rust Wind? Impossible! How?"

"Now that's what I like to hear, old man."

Kurokawa appeared to be having the time of his life. He chuckled cruelly and stood up straight.

"The weapon that once destroyed Tokyo contained within itself a device to do just that. A reactor that generated an infinite supply of Rust."

"..."

"And there he is. Our little sleeping beauty. The one who blew a hole in Tokyo and dragged this country into a sea of Rust."

Jabi looked back toward the furnace. There, half submerged in the sea of lava was what appeared to be the skeleton of a giant. A thin membrane, reminiscent of skin, was stretched over its bones. And in its chest, its great heart beat regularly, pumping out more and more of the foul substance.

"Tetsujin...!"

"It's said that there are half a dozen or so in all. But this is the only one that still lives."

Jabi staggered back in fright, only to find Kurokawa's hands on his shoulders.

"This must all be too much to take in for a poor old man. Come, we're here now. Take a seat."

In the control room at the top of the dome, several masked men stood in a line. Kurokawa sat Jabi down by the window and placed a mug of coffee on the table before him.

"I don't intend to get Tetsujin working again. I only need its heart. That simmering pot out there will be loaded into shells, and with the Ganesha gun next to the dome, I can fire them anywhere I want. Then, *kaboom*, and the Rust Wind will blow once more."

The glass window of the control room gave an excellent view of the reclining giant and the simmering red sea of rust below.

"Where should I target first? The Weeping Valley? Our first order of business should be wiping out the Pipe Snakes that are the source of the Rust-Eater."

"You fool...! Have you no shame?! This is pure evil...!"

"If such sentiments mattered to me, I never would have betrayed the Mushroom Keepers in the first place." Kurokawa sat down next to Jabi and brought his face close. The smell of blood seeping through the bandages over his eye was almost too much to bear. "Join me, Jabi," he said.

"..."

"I have a great deal of Rust-Eater mushrooms, as you know. According to Dr. Panda, the blood of a Mushroom Keeper is needed to awaken their true power... It's just, for the amount I have, I fear even a hundred people might not be enough."

Kurokawa lowered his voice and continued slowly, as if enjoying tormenting the old man.

"I want you to bring me the youngest, freshest Mushroom Keepers you can. I'll pay, of course. Enough for the rest of you to spend the remainder of your days in luxury. Food, housing...with pools, if you want. They'll listen to you. All you have to do is whip up some speech about how it's for the greater good..."

Their precious sacrifices will not be in vain... You know the sort of thing.”

“Silence, you blasphemous toadstool. Do you really think I’d be fool enough to accept?”

“You have no choice, I’m afraid. I can hit anywhere in the country, remember? Perhaps I’ll choose to wipe your little villages off the map first.”

Jabi couldn’t respond. The words caught in his throat. Kurokawa gave a smug grin and continued.

“You know what you have to say, don’t you? Then, I’ll ask again. Join me.”

“Kurokawa...”

“Yes?”

“Come closer...”

Kurokawa excitedly approached, and Jabi head-butted him square in the nose.

“Heh-heh-heh! Silly boy. Fire away, if you’ve got the balls!” Jabi chuckled as Kurokawa dropped to his knees, blood spurting from his nose. “You won’t do it! You know why? ’Cause you’re a coward! A coward who can’t even bear the insults of an old man!”

“You decrepit old fool!”

One of the men in black suits stepped up and punched Jabi as hard as he could. Again and again, until his rabbit mask was stained with Jabi’s blood.

“Whoa there. Calm down. We want him alive for now.” The bodyguard’s show of violence had somewhat abated Kurokawa’s anger. “...Ah, I know,” he said flatly, taking out a knife from his pocket and tossing it on the floor. “Make it so he can’t draw a bow. That’ll be one less accolade to worry about.”

The rabbit-headed man bent down and picked up the knife, then slammed Jabi’s hand down on the floor and held it there.

“Jabi,” said Kurokawa. “It’d be such a shame for the famous Godbow to lose his fingers. All you have to say is yes. I’ll count down from ten... Ten, nine...”

“Just do it, Kurokawa. Cut off an old man’s fingers, and perhaps you’ll finally

sleep well tonight.”

“Zero.”

As Kurokawa spoke, the rabbit-headed man lifted the knife above his head and swung it down with all his might, slicing clean through not Jabi’s fingers but his manacles. Then the rabbit-headed man and Jabi both leaped in opposite directions, attacking the other suited bodyguards who lined the walls. As Kurokawa quailed in fright, the rabbit-headed man drew his blade and, in the blink of an eye, slit the throats of half a dozen guards. Meanwhile, Jabi pulverized three of their jaws with a series of kicks from his unbelievably powerful legs.

When at last the rest of Kurokawa’s bodyguards had time to react, they launched themselves at the rabbit-headed man, but one flash of the blade in his hand, and their blood was splattered all over the walls and floor like some kind of perverse modern art piece. Then he came for Kurokawa. One guard stepped in the way, but the rabbit-headed man knocked him aside with a roundhouse kick before bringing his knife down on the Imihama governor.

There was a clang of metal as Kurokawa used his handgun to intercept the blow. Exiled though he was, Kurokawa was still a Mushroom Keeper. He kicked the rabbit-headed man off him and fired several shots, but the masked man dodged every last bullet by leaping between Kurokawa’s guards. Then, like a snake poised to strike at its prey, he coiled his body and sprang upon Kurokawa, plunging his knife into his foot.

“Gaahh!”

Kurokawa swung his arm to fend off the man, grasping the ears of his mask and pulling. Beneath was a head of burning-red hair. The man flashed a fearless grin, and when Kurokawa saw those unforgettable emerald eyes, fear gripped his heart.

“Boo.”

“Akaboshiii!”

Kurokawa aimed right at Bisco’s head, but before he could pull the trigger, Bisco plunged his foot straight into Kurokawa’s stomach, and he flew back,

shattering the plate-glass window and falling, amid a flurry of shards, toward the glowing furnace below.

The puppeted men in black panicked, and they all scrambled to the window, leaping down toward the catwalk that stretched out over the surface of the red-hot rust in pursuit of their master. Kurokawa had managed to grab on to the edge of the catwalk and wriggled back to his feet as one of his bodyguards ran over and helped him up. Then he gave a roar of anger and kicked his minion over the edge.

“Huh. Pretty stubborn guy,” said Bisco as he looked down from the control room, smiling as he removed his stuffy suit and tie. “Sorry I hit you, old man. We’ll call it even for all the times you tanned my hide when I was a kid, ’kay?”

“Bisco, what happened to you...?!”

Jabi gasped when he saw Bisco’s body. The Rust now stretched from his right shoulder, up his neck, and over his cheeks. The rest of his skin was still covered by his clothes, but it wasn’t hard to imagine the full horrifying extent of the disease.

“Bisco, my boy... Why? Why did you come to save an old fart like me?”

“Ha! You think I could just sit back and let you die? I ain’t...done with you yet!”

Bisco winced and stopped for a second, and Jabi rushed to his side. Bisco gently brushed his hand aside and smiled.

“I’ll finish off Kurokawa,” he said. “...It’s time we settled things. Meanwhile, you go and find that Ganesha gun he was talkin’ about. We need to make sure he can’t hurt the Rust-Eater...or our home.”

“Don’t be stupid, boy! I can’t leave you here!”

“Who am I, Jabi?”

Bisco’s sparkling emerald eyes looked straight into Jabi’s own.

“I’m Bisco. The man you put all your effort into raising. So trust me. Just like I trust you.”

Jabi knew this all too well. Bisco was proud—and stubborn. But something

had changed. Before, he had always been an empty bowl. Now, for the first time, Jabi saw that he was filled with warm water.

“...Bisco. Do you hate me?” Jabi asked, hanging his head, his voice shaking. “I dragged you through the pits of Hell. I brought you here, to the very brink of death. All this time, I never let you know what love is. Do you hate me for that, Bisco...?”

Bisco didn't make a move. He just stared as Jabi trembled before him. Then he silently knelt down and hugged his father figure as tightly as he could with his Rust-eaten arms. Jabi tensed up, and his eyes went wide with shock. But feeling the warmth of Bisco's body and the beating of his heart, he relaxed and let out a sigh, exhaling all the breath in his tiny lungs.

Bisco closed his eyes and waited until his master stopped shaking. Then he lifted up his emaciated body and hurled him toward the elevator.

“Go, Jabi!”

“Don't you die on me, Bisco!”

As he left, Jabi tossed Bisco his Mushroom Keeper's cloak. Bisco put it on and picked up his bow from where he had hidden his luggage.

There was only one thing left to do.

The Rust-addled Man-Eating Redcap flashed his glimmering canines and leaped through the broken glass window down into the furnace, his heart only emboldened by the prospect of certain death.

The catwalk creaked and groaned as Bisco struck the ground like a meteor. The sight he was met with was a bit of a letdown, as Kurokawa's minions were strewn about the place in various stages of death. Some stood frozen, turned to statues by the rust that jetted out from the furnace in spurts, while others spasmed in the throes of death, impaled on broken handrails. A few crawled along the ground, dragging their rusted legs behind them. It wasn't a very good look for the Big Bad's inner sanctum.

Kurokawa was leaning against a handrail, gasping for breath. Bisco cracked his neck and walked steadily over, his canines gleaming.

“Hey, asshole,” he said. “I’m putting my life on the line here. The least you could do is give me a decent final battle. This place is falling apart.”

“I could say the same thing about you, Akaboshi...!” Kurokawa fought to steady his breathing and shakily pointed his handgun at Bisco. “Write your will, and I’ll sign it for you. Whether by the Rust or my hand, you’ll die here.”

“That’s true.” Bisco smiled, stroking his chin with a rusted finger, and said, “So how come you’re still afraid of me? I can see your knees shaking from here.”

“I’ll tear you limb from limb, Akaboshi!”

As if on cue, there suddenly came an obnoxious buzzing noise from all across the circular wall that surrounded the furnace. A spray of machine-gun fire caused Bisco to leap back, and he saw dozens of military wasps, pointing the guns strapped to their sides at Bisco.

“Where’d you get all these bees from?!”

“I always come prepared...!”

“That’s ’cause you’re a yellow-bellied, chickenshit son of a bitch!”

As Kurokawa turned to unsteadily make his escape, Bisco shot after him but was blocked by a horde of bodyguards, and the wasps aimed their machine guns at him. Whipping out his knife, Bisco stabbed one of the black-suited guards in the chest and used his body as a shield to push ahead. Once he got in range, he hurled the bulky corpse at the wasps, knocking them all out of the sky and into the burning sea beneath them.

The rest of the wasps adopted a battle formation and swooped down on him. Pulling one of Milo’s blue-tipped arrows from his quiver, he fired it at the leader of the swarm. From its corpse sprang a spiderweb that ensnared the rest of the wasps, causing them to tumble helplessly to the ground and into the furnace.

An endless supply of bodyguards streamed from an emergency exit in the back. Bisco nocked one of his weightiest anchor arrows and toppled them all as they attempted to push through the tight space. A particularly massive anchorshroom then burst forth from their bodies, causing the fragile catwalk to collapse and drop the pursuing suits into the Rust-smelting pool.

“Akaboshiii!”

“...!”

While Bisco was occupied with the wasps, Kurokawa had escaped up the stairs and fired down upon him. Bisco tried to move his head out of the line of fire, but the bullet landed in his eye, scattering blood everywhere.

However, that didn’t stop Bisco. While Kurokawa grinned in triumph, Bisco drew his bow, fixing his unfaltering aim on Kurokawa’s head. Even with one eye missing, Bisco had faith in the sureness of his shot.

But at the critical moment...

Bisco’s Rust-eaten finger snapped clean off.

Ngrh! My finger...!

Bisco released his arrow too early. Flying through the air, it fell short of its intended target and landed in Kurokawa’s thigh. He cried out in pain, but then that scream gradually turned into a chuckle, until Kurokawa was howling with laughter.

“Oh, what’s the matter, Akaboshi? Lost your finger? Can’t draw your bow? Well, that’s just the way the world is! No matter how strong you get, you’ll always lose to me by a hair’s breadth! Punks like you will never amount to anything!”

Bisco looked at the crumbling remains of his left hand and closed his remaining eye. When he opened it again, it still shone brilliant emerald, and his indomitable smile returned.

“Kurokawa... Do you really think you’ve won just because I can’t fire my bow...?”

His fierce, blood-soaked grin rooted Kurokawa to the spot in terror. Bisco’s emerald eyes forced his jet-black stare into submission, and yet he couldn’t look away.

“You’d better start running, Kurokawa. Because as long as I still have a tooth—a single fingernail, even—I will always be able to kill you.”

Bisco’s words struck the fear of God into Kurokawa, and he turned to flee,

dragging his wounded leg behind him. Bisco followed, and as the last remaining suits threw themselves at him, he struck them each aside with a swing of his fist and sent them tumbling into the molten rust.

He could no longer kick. No longer jump. In the unbearable heat of the furnace, Bisco was on the brink of collapse. Still, he hauled along his broken body, treading the long, long walkway in dogged pursuit of Kurokawa, until at last he arrived at its core. The end of the catwalk, with no escape.

“Stay back! Don’t come any closer, Akaboshi! I’ll shoot you where you stand! Die!”

Kurokawa’s bullets landed in Bisco’s flesh, one after the other. His shoulder burst open, his ear was shot clean off, and blood spilled from his mouth, but he didn’t stop moving forward, his one eye fixed unerringly on Kurokawa.

“See you in Hell, Kurokawa...!”

“Noooooooo!”

Bisco swung his right arm with full force into Kurokawa’s face...

...and it shattered to pieces.

Bisco fell to one knee, and that, too, crumbled when it hit the ground. Bisco groaned slightly and tried to stand back up on his other foot, when he took a bullet and began to fall forward. Kurokawa reeled back and only just managed to grab ahold of the guardrail. Sweat dripped down his entire body, and he panted for breath, before letting out a final yell, emptying his magazine in Bisco’s direction.

His body riddled with bullet holes, spurting blood, and yet using all his strength, Bisco remained upright, glaring at Kurokawa. With a wave of his hand, the governor surrounded him with a swarm of machine-gun-laden battle wasps.

“...Ex...explain to me...those eyes, Akaboshi...,” he said, interspersed with feeble gasps. He had no quips left, no scorn or laughter. All he wanted was to know why that emerald eye still glittered like a diamond.

“Even Goku still had his right arm when he beat King Piccolo.

“You don’t even have that anymore.

“You’ve got no fourth-dimensional pocket. Butterko’s not coming to save you.

“You’re just a dirty old mutt who’s about to drown in a pool of his own blood...!

“So why? Why on earth can you still make that face?!”

Bisco silently allowed Kurokawa his spiel, his lips pursed, his eyes never once turning away. He opened his mouth to answer, but all that came out was a red waterfall, and he chuckled and gave up trying to speak.

“You were supposed to defeat me, Akaboshi...!” said Kurokawa, reloading his pistol and pointing it squarely at Bisco’s face. “Any last words before you die?”

“...You...”

“...Hmm?”

“...You tell me, fuckface.”

“Then die in this accursed place, Akaboshi! Die!”

Kurokawa pulled the trigger. Just then, there was a piercing flash of light, and the gun was ripped out of his hand along with all his fingers. He let out a gasping cry and peered up toward the emergency exit to see a boy with sky-blue hair.

“Let Bisco go, Kurokawa!”

“Silence, child! One more move, and I’ll shoot—”

Taking advantage of the opening, Bisco leaped at Kurokawa like a wild beast and sank his teeth into his throat. The two of them toppled off the catwalk and plunged into the depths of the furnace.

“Biscoooo!” screamed his partner, but Milo’s voice grew distant, and he and Kurokawa slammed into the surprisingly hard, red-hot surface of the rusty mire. There Bisco gnawed at Kurokawa’s throat with all his might.

“Grrbgh! Gaaah! Grgghh! Khaagh!”

The blood spurted from Kurokawa’s throat like a fountain, and the flesh of his back sizzled under the heat of the furnace. His black eyes went wide, and he let forth wretched cries that didn’t sound human. Each time he tried to take a

breath, blood poured from his neck and into the sea of rust, where it sizzled and popped and became clouds of steam.

“What a nice death, Kurokawa. It’s like something out of a movie,” said Bisco after spitting out the flesh caught between his teeth. “Where are your usual jokes?” He chuckled. “Not gonna say ‘I’ll be back’?”

Bisco put what little strength he had remaining into his left arm and grabbed on to Kurokawa’s head, pushing it down into the glowing mire.

“Akaboshi...! Akaboshiii...! I’ll kill you...! I’ll kill every last one of you! Then I’ll finally have my sleep!”

“Sleep as long as you like in the ocean of rust you created.”

With one last shove, Bisco managed to sink Kurokawa’s face fully beneath the surface.

“Gbhaahhh!”

He squirmed and writhed in agony, thrashing his arms and legs. Once Bisco’s arm was half submerged, the flailing finally stopped, and his trousers burst into flames, gently smoldering to ash.

Bisco pulled his arm out of the boiling swamp and looked at it, hanging limply. Then for some reason, he gave a satisfied smile. As his legs sank into the rust, and he waited to meet his death in the same place as Kurokawa, the only emotion present on his face was acceptance.

Then.

The bodies of the machine-gun wasps fell into the swamp. Up above, where Bisco had stood, was the boy with blue hair. Milo’s sapphire eyes were filled with tears. They dribbled down his cheeks and turned to steam when they struck the glowing rust. As much as Bisco wanted to console him, there was little he could say, so he just looked up and smiled.

“...You promised me. You said we’d always be together!”

“...”

“Don’t leave me, Bisco... I’ll be all alone...”

“Milo!”

Bisco removed the emerald bow from his back and tossed it up to Milo. Milo caught it in his hand. It was completely free of rust and glimmered pristine in the light.

“So what if my flesh and bones disappear? My soul will never die. I’ll always protect you...even if I have to crawl back up outta Hell to do it... Milo. You’re my partner. Now...and forever.”

“ ...”

“So smile, Milo... Whenever you’re scared. Whenever it hurts. Smile. Smile like I always did. Because whenever you smile...I’ll be right there with you.”

Then, as the tears streamed down Milo’s face, he clenched his teeth, sucked in a deep breath...and smiled.

Bisco gave him a gentle look. The flames worked their way up his clothes and licked at his skin, gradually charring him black. He was gritting his teeth against the pain, barely able to contain himself.

“Bisco!”

“Milo. Take my life,” he said, his voice beginning to fail him. He bared his chest and pointed to it. “Before the Rust does. Finish me off...and take my essence into yourself.”

“ ...”

“Can you?”

“Yeah,” replied Milo, opening his reddened eyes and pulling Bisco’s bow tight. He leveled a mushroom arrow at Bisco’s heart.

As always, their eyes burned azure and crimson flames into each other, like two great stars with a magnetic pull from across the void.

Milo’s stance was just as Bisco had taught him. Beautiful, gallant, noble, and tragic. Though he could do nothing to stop the tears, Milo was not afraid.

“I want...”

“ ...”

“I want to try living like you. No matter how many times I break, no matter how many times I fall, I want to stand back up and smile. Perhaps then, one day...when I’m nothing but a soul, surrounded by the broken fragments of my body...”

“ ...”

“We’ll meet again, won’t we?”

“Yeah.”

“ ...”

“You can count on it.”

He blinked only once. As he did, a single pearl slid down his cheek and dropped from his chin.

What can I say?

I never found the right words.

I’m sorry.

I didn’t know how else to tell you how I feel.

I love you.

Bisco.

I’ll always love you, even when you’re not here anymore...

Pchew! Milo’s arrow sliced the air and landed with a thud in Bisco’s heart. Bisco steadied himself from falling and cast his eyes down at the arrow embedded in his chest. Already, the mycelium was beginning to spread through his body. He was a little sad he was too numb to feel the pain of his partner’s arrow. In its place, a strong drowsiness overcame him. As much as he fought to stay awake, his vision was blanking out, and he surrendered his mind to eternal sleep. All he could feel was the fungal roots spreading through his body, embracing him, warming him, and then the orange glow of the Rust consumed his vision.

Boom! Crash! The sound of explosions rocked the furnace, and the whole thing began to sway perilously. As the catwalk crumbled to pieces, the warrior woman Pawoo called out, searching for Bisco and her little brother, driven to mad panic by the thought of him being in danger.

“Milooo! Akaboshiii! Where are you, Milo?”

Above her head, a large chunk of debris fell from the dome toward her. Then: *Pchew!* There was the glint of an emerald bow, and a clump of clamshell mushrooms blasted the rubble to pieces. As Pawoo was cloaked in choking dust, Milo grabbed her in his arms and leaped between the fragments.

“Milo! You’re okay!” Pawoo beamed, her face riddled with cuts and bruises. As Milo put her down, she looked around expectantly. “Where’s...? Where’s Akaboshi?!”

“...In here,” said Milo, clutching his chest with a peaceful expression. From the way his eyes trembled, Pawoo gleaned all she needed to know. It looked as though he might burst into tears at any moment. “He’s right here. With me.”

Pawoo was struck silent. Her brother’s innocent words left her unable to form a response. Eventually, she bit her lip and persevered.

“...Jabi and I destroyed the Ganesha gun. All that’s left now is to get out of here, but I wonder if we even can.”

“We’ll be fine, Pawoo!”

Putting Bisco’s death out of their mind for the moment, the pair sprang up and out of the crumbling rust furnace. Leaping off the walls and beams, they managed to arrive at the emergency exit. Pawoo blasted the crumpled door off its hinges with her staff, and the two of them barely managed to put the dome behind them before it collapsed completely. Rolling to avoid the rubble that was thrown up in the destruction, Milo and Pawoo made it at last to an area of

relative safety.

“That’s the end of Kurokawa’s insanity,” said Pawoo, turning to watch the pillar of black smoke that rose out of the ground behind them.

Milo thought of his partner, left within the smoke.

“Do you think he’s okay?”

At the quiet voice, Pawoo turned to her brother. He was staring intently at the column of smoke, his expression calm...and his eyes trembling, as though he was afraid his courage might give way at any second.

“His body, I mean. Do you think it’s still safe?”

“I imagine so. We’ll clear off all the rust...and burn it. Then we’ll take it to his village, and—”

“No, Mushroom Keepers don’t burn their dead. They bury them. That’s what he said.”

Milo looked out distantly, as if beyond the smoke, and spoke in a clear voice.

“Maybe I just want to see you one last time... Please don’t be mad at me.”

Pawoo watched her brother’s face in profile, her hair buffeted by the strong wind. She opened her mouth hesitantly, as if to speak, when...

Kroom! A great noise erupted from the destroyed remains of the dome, and a huge chunk of debris flew out toward the two of them.

“Watch out, Pawoo!”

Just as the two leaped aside, an enormous steel girder impaled the ground where they had been standing. When they landed, they both looked out toward the rubble.

There they saw a colossal arm of rust-colored metal, stretching out of the smoke.

The arm swung sideways through the air, striking one of the base’s watchtowers and sending it crashing to the ground in a cloud of dust. A great gust of wind blew the dust aside, and where the dome once was, there now stood a giant human figure. Its entire body was coated in rust, and upon closer

inspection, it seemed to be wrapped up in scrap metal from the collapsed dome.

“What is that?!” Pawoo cried as Milo grabbed ahold of her and hid the two of them out of the giant’s sight. A squadron of the base’s tanks approached in formation and fired, and although each of their main cannons hit the giant directly in the stomach, it didn’t so much as flinch.

Suddenly, the mouth of the iron mask that covered the giant’s face opened sideways. The giant took in a huge breath, and then...

“GOOOOOOOOHHHH!”

It blew a deep, hollow breath toward the tank squadron. Only a few seconds after the tanks were exposed to it, they, along with the entire road and nearby buildings, were coated in a thick layer of rust.

“Th-that’s Tetsujin...!”

It was truly an incarnation of humanity’s ruin. A weapon akin to a god.

As more and more of the government’s weapons joined the fight, the giant crushed them underfoot, swept them aside, and slowly but with a very definite intent, it started to move in a particular direction.

“I thought it was just supposed to be generating the Rust!” cried Pawoo. “How can it still move?!”

“...It’s...,” Milo began but then swallowed his next word, “Kurokawa,” with a gulp. There was no doubt now that the giant was moving on to Akita, toward the Weeping Valley. What’s more, in its empty eyes, Milo could feel a familiar darkness—and Kurokawa’s distinctive ambition.

“...It’s going to destroy Japan. Again...”

Pawoo froze in terror as she looked up at the walking weapon of mass destruction. Milo slipped past her and ran. When Pawoo tried to stop him, he brushed her aside, hopped onto his sister’s motorcycle, and twisted the accelerator.

“Milo!”

“He’s heading for the Weeping Valley,” said Milo with determination. “He’s

trying to exterminate the Pipe Snakes and get rid of the Rust-Eater. I have to stop him.”

“Didn’t you see what that thing just did? It’s a god! Destruction incarnate! You’ll turn to rust before you can even get close!”

“No, I won’t. I’ve had the Rust-Eater vaccine. That means I’m the only one who can stop it.”

Milo brought his hand to his sister’s cheek. Even now she seemed ready to break into tears.

“I have to leave,” he said softly. “You go and free the Shimobuki people.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I’m coming with you! I can’t let you go out there alone!”

“Pawoo,” said Milo, and for the first time, a grin spread across his panda face, showing the glint of his teeth. “I’m not alone anymore. You know that.”

Brushing his sister aside, Milo disappeared after the giant, leaving a trail of dust in his wake. Pawoo clutched her chest tightly as she watched him depart.

I saw it on his face. He doesn’t intend to die...!

Her hesitation evaporated in moments. She knew what she had to do now. She turned to run.

Suddenly, a van drove up, tires screeching, and stopped before her. The passenger door was kicked open, and a petite girl called out from within.

“You’re Pawoo, of the Vigilante Corps, right? I’ve been lookin’ all over for ya! Get in! The troops are close by!”

“The troops? Who are you?!”

“Tirol Ochagama! But that don’t matter! Ya wanna beat Kurokawa, right? Well, these vigilante dudes ain’t gonna listen to a thing I say! Come with me—quickly!”

The colossus lazily swung its arms, swatting at the fighter jets that swarmed around its body like flies. They scrambled as the huge arm tore through the air, leaving in its wake a cloud of rust that caused the fighters to lose control and crash into the giant's body. As the planes helplessly sank deeper and deeper into its thick skin of viscous rust, the monstrous engine of ruin merely stared at them, its face devoid of emotion.

"...Aka...boshi..."

Then several military helicopters arrived on the scene, dispatched from the military base, and fired their machine guns in unison upon the giant's back. The rounds shattered the scrap metal wrapped around its body, but they were all swallowed up when they hit its skin, leaving the colossus without so much as a scratch.

"Aka...bo...shiii..."

The giant turned and unleashed its rust breath, spewing forth destruction. The wind and land alike were tainted with rust, and helicopters plummeted to earth in a flaming pile of wreckage. The giant simply watched, until it determined the threat was no more and returned to its lifeless advance.

As red dust clouds scoured the barren land, the giant descended into a deep valley, until only its top half was visible. There the traders of Shimobuki had set up camps in the rock face, clinging to the valley walls. With each step, another settlement was splintered to pieces by the giant's frame, and the air was filled with the inhabitants' screams as they fled in terror, some clutching their livestock, others their children.

Then, up on the cliff, they saw it. At about the height of the giant's chest, a solitary figure standing atop a hill, cloak flapping in the wind. In his hand was a bow that glittered like emerald, and his eyes burned with azure flames. Without

a single shred of fear, he stood in defiance of the colossal titan.

The giant paused. Somewhere within its hazed mind, a memory stirred.

“Ain’t that nice, Kurokawa? Looks like you went and got yourself a slightly bigger body.”

“Uuuuuh... Ooooooh.”

“What, ya thought I was dead? Thought you managed to drag me down with ya?”

Milo’s sky-blue hair flared up, dancing like a candle in the wind.

“Say my name, Kurokawa. If death ain’t enough for you, I’ll drag you down to Hell myself!”

“A...ka...bo...shiii.”

The giant suddenly shook with rage and slammed its right arm down on the hilltop, crushing rocks and sending clouds of dust into the air. Out of that cloud sprang Milo, rising into the air and firing an arrow back down at the giant’s fingers. The arrow ripped through the air and pierced its knuckle, exploding with a *Gaboom!* into a flurry of bright-red capped mushrooms and pinning its hand to the cliff. The giant swung its other arm at Milo, but he landed and bounced off the full-grown mushrooms, evading the blow and landing two more arrows in its elbow and shoulder.

“Ooooooh... Rrrrrrr.”

Gaboom! Gaboom! The giant groaned as the mushrooms’ explosive growth pushed it back. It swung its arm once more, but Milo flitted left and right, springing across the rocky mountain, while his fourth and fifth arrows found their marks, blasting pieces off the giant’s body. As the shrapnel sliced Milo’s skin, he showed not the slightest sign of pain, but instead, his expression was fixed in steely determination.

Life against death. Nature versus ruin. Tetsujin wailed as the mushrooms spread across its body, eating away at the Rust. In apparent panic, it scratched at itself, plucking the mushrooms like weeds. Then it started shaking ominously and opened its mouth. Unleashing a mighty breath, it engulfed Milo in a stream

of corroding rust.

Gale-force winds shook his body. Rust particles swamped his lungs, and his entire body disappeared in a thick sulfuric-yellow cloud. Then, from out of the storm there came a flash of light, and a single arrow pierced the wind, landing deep in the back of the giant's throat. The titan's decaying breath found its path blocked by giant mushrooms and, with no other place to go, burst through the giant's neck like a ruptured steam valve.

The storm of rust subsided. Milo staggered and gasped for breath, before finally dropping to one knee. Blood and tears dripped from the corners of his eyes, but his pale-white skin was pristine. The Rust-Eater had proved its power.

"What a drama queen... Do my mushrooms hurt so much?" Milo gave a toothy grin, just as Bisco always did when he fought against the unbeatable. "Mushrooms are life. They are the will to live incarnate. They will devour a being of senseless destruction like you!"

Tetsujin let out a moan as its breath tore up its throat and jaw, then reached inside its own mouth and pulled out the obstructing mushrooms. Without giving it a chance to recover, Milo drew his bow once more, but then he noticed a group of Shimobuki arms dealers setting up on a hill nearby, aiming their bazookas at the giant. They bravely launched shot after shot in defense of the women and children of their village. One of them waved his hand toward Milo, who called out to them across the great distance.

"No, it's too dangerous! Get out of here!"

Tetsujin let out an irritated groan as the explosions blasted the area around its throat. It slowly twisted its upper body toward them and swung its right arm down with monstrous strength. Milo couldn't bear to watch as the giant's fist slammed into the ground. But when the smoke cleared, there was something orange gripping the arm by the wrist, holding it up and just barely protecting the merchants.

"Actagawa!"

"Fire away, boy! Let him have it!" shouted Jabi from atop the giant crab, and Milo quickly drew his bow tight, letting loose an arrow toward Tetsujin's wrist. The arrow hit its mark, and a mushroom exploded into being, causing the giant

to recoil in pain, and Actagawa used his mighty claws to toss the arm aside.

“Keep on shooting, my boy!” shouted Jabi as he drew his own bow. “It might look like the Rust is winning, but he’s being eaten up inside by the fungus! We just have to keep the pressure on, and victory is ours!”

The two Mushroom Keepers fired at Tetsujin from both sides of the valley. As it frantically tried to scrape off the mushrooms growing all across its body, it let out a blast of rust breath in Actagawa’s direction.

“Jabi!”

Actagawa leaped around trying to evade the Rust, but it was only a matter of time before the giant’s persistent attack would catch up with him. The scouring wind crept closer and closer, until...

“Haiiiyaaaaahhh!”

A streak of black hair zipped through the sky, swooping down from above like a falcon. The silver warrior’s staff sliced the air and connected with the side of Tetsujin’s face, stopping the giant’s terrifying Rust breath.

“Pawoo!”

“Milo! The Imihama Vigilantes are here! They’ll take care of the townspeople!”

Leaping off Tetsujin’s shoulder, she arrived at Milo’s side and readied her staff once more. While Milo drew his bow, she knocked aside all the fragments of Tetsujin’s body that were raining down on them from above.

To the south, Milo could see a squad of Escargot Planes approaching in Imihama’s colors, and across the land rode a platoon of iguana cavalry. They rescued the panicking Shimobuki villagers and led them safely out of the valley. Just as Tetsujin attempted to crush them underfoot, the Escargot bombers halted its movements with a barrage of rocket fire.

All of humanity’s power was assembling on that plain, united in grand battle against the lone harbinger of destruction. Without pause, the Mushroom Keeper’s arrows and the waves of modern weaponry left Tetsujin unable to do a single thing but protect its own body by flailing its arms like a baby.

“Have we got it...?!” asked Pawoo. “Just a little more, Milo!”

“Wait, something’s wrong...!” he replied, grabbing onto his sister’s arm and pulling her back.

Milo could feel, somewhere in his basest instincts, that something dark swirled within Tetsujin’s body, yearning to break free.

Tetsujin began to quake. The armor plating on its chest slid open, revealing what appeared to be a pair of giant fans. As the smoke from the blasts whirled around it, the propellers slowly spun up...

For a second, all was silent. Then a sudden gale assaulted the land, accompanied by an earsplitting roar. An unbelievable volume of rust spilled forth from the giant’s chest, eating away even its own skin. The wind swirled, picking up speed, until it became an unstoppable tornado, and the very rock walls of the valley began to crumble and break away.

The whole land was suddenly transformed by a storm of death. The final bastions of humanity, just a minute away from victory, were obliterated in the blink of an eye. The Escargot Planes became lumps of iron and fell out of the sky, and even the iguana cavalry, who had just returned after freeing the villagers, were turned to rust and shattered to pieces without even having the chance to scream.

Milo pushed Pawoo down to the ground, trying as best he could to protect her from the wind’s harmful influence. Actagawa leaped from the opposite valley, cutting through the storm, and wrapped them all up, including Jabi, inside his protective embrace.

“Aahh...! Stay with me, Milo!” said Pawoo.

“Is this as far as I go?! ” cried Jabi. “We’re nearly there!”

As the two languished in despair, Milo slowly rose to his feet. He staggered, leaned against Actagawa for support, and gently stroked the smooth shell of his belly.

“Milo...?! ”

Not responding to his sister’s voice behind him, Milo took out a bright-red vial

from the pouch at his belt and injected the strength potion into his own neck. He grimaced in pain as the powerful liquid flowed into his veins.

“A red vial... No, it can’t be... A Bishamon mushroom potion?! Your body won’t be able to take it!”

“I’m sorry, Jabi... Look after Pawoo for me.”

“Can’t you see this rust storm?! You won’t come back alive this time, my boy!”

“If Bisco were here, would you try to stop him?”

“Mmrh...!”

“I’m off.”

“No, stop! Don’t go! Milo!” Pawoo pleaded.

The only ones who could survive within the incessant gale were Actagawa, whose natural resistance protected him from the Rust, and Milo, who had taken the Rust-Eater vaccine. That much was simple fact.

“We have to trust the kid...!” said Jabi, holding Pawoo back, though the very thought of losing two sons in a single day left him trembling in fear.

Engulfed in a storm of rust, the threats to Tetsujin’s being had disappeared in the blink of an eye, and the iron giant slowly turned its head to survey the battlefield. When it spotted the last of the Shimobuki traders about to reach the safety of the blizzard, it opened its mouth wide and prepared to unleash another blast of its corrosive breath.

Suddenly, from the side, a cataclysmic shot pierced the giant’s jaw, and there was a great *Gaboom!* as a blue mushroom filled its throat. Its airways blocked, Tetsujin cried out in a low groan.

“...Is your brain too small to remember?” yelled Milo through gritted teeth, his face drenched in blood. “I told you, Kurokawa. Your opponent here is me!”

As Milo railed against the wind atop a rocky mountain, Tetsujin swung his arm toward him. While Milo normally would have been able to dodge such an attack with ease, this time he was surrounded on all sides by the harsh winds of the rust storm, and to evade would have meant getting caught up in them. The

huge lump of rusted iron struck Milo with such force that he was sent flying into the rock face, colliding with it in a cloud of dust.

“Milooo!” Pawoo screamed, twisting her body to try to break free from Actagawa’s legs. Meanwhile, Tetsujin brought his colossal left arm down upon them.

Just then, there was another *Gaboom!* An arrow flew from the cliff where the dust cloud had not yet cleared, striking the giant’s wrist and tearing it away from Actagawa. There Milo strode, dragging his body toward the enormous iron giant, even as the blood cascaded down his body, his blue eyes open wide.

As Tetsujin’s arm stretched toward him, he fired again. The hand snatched up Milo’s body and began to squeeze, but when the arrow exploded, the pain caused the giant to release its grip. Milo fired another shot as he fell through the air, before crashing clumsily into the ground.

“Let me go! Milo’s going to die! I have to... I have to...”

“My boy...!”

Jabi and Actagawa desperately tried to restrain Pawoo. It was such a gruesome scene that even the old man had difficulty preventing himself from jumping in to help. Still, as the blood-soaked Milo rose to his feet yet again, there was no trace of resignation or despair on his face. He stood and faced Tetsujin with sheer determination in his heart, his blue eyes blazing, as if swearing an oath to his dead partner.

Jabi studied his face. He never looked so much like Bisco until now. The only thing keeping Jabi from intervening was a vague feeling, somewhere inside his heart, that it was too soon to give up.

Why am I still standing?

Milo had been struck by the Rust so many times, fired so many arrows in return, that it didn’t feel like he was the one doing the fighting anymore. He could see clearly that his body had been broken far beyond anything he should have been able to endure. And yet his arms continued to pull the bowstring, his legs continued to support his body, as if that’s simply what they were made to do. And from somewhere deep inside him, he could feel limitless courage

issuing forth.

This must be how Bisco felt.

He stood where his partner once did and drew his bow as he had done.

That made Milo very happy.

As he leaped away from Tetsujin's mighty swing, he took a deep breath.

Now...

He drew Bisco's emerald bow tight.

...I can shoot just like him.

His face stained with blood, his sapphire eyes glinted. *Pchew!* His arrow penetrated the armor on Tetsujin's chest and pierced its skin, and a mushroom burst into being, blasting the armor plating off its body and exposing the wiring around the fans.

Tetsujin gave a wail of anguish and nearly toppled over. Milo seized the chance, running up to the giant and leaping toward it, clinging onto its skin and climbing up toward its breast. Then, with a yell, he drew his knife and drove it deeply into the mass of exposed cabling, tearing it up as he slid down the titan's body.

"Take thiiiis!"

"Ooooh... Ooooh... AAAAAAAAAAH!"

The giant let out a wail of pain greater than any before. Without its wiring, the twin fans embedded in Tetsujin's chest ground to a halt, throwing out sparks and clouds of black smoke.

It worked!

The storm of rust that coated the land stopped and cleared away. With misty eyes, Milo barely managed to hang on using his blade. For a moment, his focus slackened, and he found himself unable to move a single muscle. The blood poured into his eyes, mixed with his tears, and streamed down his face, as if he had forgotten how to even blink.

No... I can't die yet...!

That thought was the only thing tying his broken mind together. It took all of his efforts simply to fend off the encroaching darkness. Milo kept his eyes wide open, for he knew that if he closed them, they would never open again.

Then he spotted something glinting in the corner of his vision. There, in the torn-out chest cavity of the giant, a sparkling diamond lay amid the dull gleam of Tetsujin's rusted skin.

It was a pair of goggles.

Bisco's favorite pair of cat-eye goggles, the ones he never parted with. The ones that always rested on his forehead. They lay there, half buried in the rust, rattling helplessly in the wind.

"...Bisco!"

Just as Milo's mind was about to sink into oblivion, he came to his senses. Summoning the last few ounces of strength that resided deep within his body, he began scaling Tetsujin once more and plucked Bisco's goggles out from where they lay buried in the rust.

"...Bisco...are you there...?" Milo cried weakly toward the spot where the goggles had been. There was no logical thought left in his mind. Only the thought that, below the rust, his partner's body might still be buried. With his bare hands, he clawed away at the metal dust.

"Bisco... I knew it. You're gone...and I'm all alone...in this cold place..."

"Let's go back, Bisco. Together. Everyone's waiting for us. Let's go...!"

No matter how much Milo scraped away the rust, it seemed to come endlessly, like falling sand, and he couldn't get through the thick skin. Yet still he persisted, even as his fingernails ran red with blood.

"Give him back... Give him back...! Give Bisco back to meeee!" he screamed, until blood nearly erupted from his throat. In response, the giant gripped him in its hand and threw him toward a distant cliff face. Lacking the energy to resist, Milo collided with the hard rock wall.

He opened his mouth to speak, but all that came out was blood. He tried to ready his bow, but he couldn't even lift his arms. At the very least, he wanted to

look his death in the eye, and so with the last of his strength, he craned his neck upward. His sapphire eyes watched the giant's arm slowly descend upon him, until the very last moment.

It felt itself drifting in a sea of white, swaddled in something clear, thick, and warm.

It felt as though it were sitting next to its own soul, watching it dissolve. It felt itself bathed in strange tranquility.

In that silent world of infinite peace, it struggled in discomfort, a single ripple on the surface of an endless sea, before that, too, dispersed into nothing.

Sweet whispers in its mind told it that every last piece of its heart, every last drop of hesitation, was being stripped away and absorbed into this white world, and soon it would be one with eternity.

It had no reason to resist. But deep within its heart, there was one last emotion that refused to dissolve into the boundless ocean.

Yet gradually, like sand, even that final piece of its heart began to splinter.

"Bisco."

And then, it stopped.

It heard a soft noise, a rift in the perfect silence. Something that meant something. Something that was very important.

It was something it should have known. It was something more valuable than anything. It pulsed and struggled, drawing that meaning toward it.

"Bisco...!"

The second time it heard it, it recognized that the sound was its own name, and the eye that dwelled deep within its mind opened wide.

Power flowed back in from outside. Its eyes. Its arms. Its legs. Its disintegrated body began to reform, and with all its heart, it fought against the slumber enveloping it.

"Bisco!"

The third time it heard it, it recognized whose voice was calling its name.

Its body brimmed with energy, and it let out a yell that shook the air. Cracks started forming in the infinite white, the sweet release of death was rejected, and Bisco was ejected from that place back into a world of darkness.

“!!!”

He emerged, as if from deep underwater, gasping for breath. Sensation returned to his body all at once, and he felt the Rust clinging to him all over. Clenching his teeth, he focused his full power and started to tear his way out of the rusted hide.

He let out a bestial howl and ripped through the shell of his cage with unrivaled strength, emerging into bright daylight. Even after being locked up in a prison of rust for so long, his body, and even his clothes and cloak, had not rusted. His flesh was as unmarred as roaring flames. Bisco was confused, but he focused on trying to reach the owner of the voice he had heard.

“Milo! Milooo!”

As if in response, the sunlight glittered off a head of sky-blue hair over on the mountain, and Bisco saw his partner on the verge of death. He sprang from Tetsujin like a bullet, and with his monstrous strength, caught the giant’s fist as it was swinging down toward Milo.

“Rrrrrggggaaaaahhh!”

With a yell, Bisco executed a roundhouse kick, breaking the fist clean off as if it were no more than a toy and sending it crashing into a distant mountaintop.

“Oooh... Ooooooh?!”

While Tetsujin gave an anguished roar, Bisco was unable to control his newfound power and spun helplessly in the air before crashing into the ground. As he rose to his feet, his gaze fell upon the countless remains of mushrooms all across Tetsujin’s body. They shone in praise of his partner’s efforts and bravery, and the very sight warmed Bisco’s heart.

“...Did Milo...do all this...?”

“...Bis...co...?”

Hearing a shaky voice behind him, Bisco whirled around and was met with his

partner's stunned look of surprise.

"Hey," he called out.

There was no way for Milo to know what he had just done. That he had scraped together the dying fragments of Bisco's mind and brought him back to life. The sight of his friend standing in front of him seemed so unreal that he could only stare wide-eyed in shock, afraid of believing too soon.

"I heard you, just before I crossed over to the other side."

"...Ah...!"

"You called for me, didn't you?"

His white canines gleamed. Bisco's cheeky smile that Milo had seen so many times before.

The tears started to well up in Milo's eyes. He stood, as if forgetting all the injuries he had suffered, and leaped into his arms. But Bisco's skin was searing to the touch, and he only held that position for about four seconds before jumping back in shock.

"Ow! That's hot! You meanie!" he shouted.

"Hot? What is?"

"Bisco... Your body..."

Then Bisco looked down at his right arm—the one previously destroyed by the Rust. The new arm that took its place glowed with an orange light, and Bisco gulped in fear. The skin was not fully formed, and he could see through to the pulsing red muscle fiber within. The same was true of his shattered legs. Bisco's body appeared to be regenerating at an alarming rate.

"What the hell?!"

"Bisco, watch out!"

Tetsujin had recovered and swung its other arm down upon them. Bisco grabbed Milo in his arms and hopped sideways out of the way. Then Milo handed Bisco his emerald bow, and Bisco took it and drew the bowstring with all his might. It scared Bisco to think of the unknown, seemingly infinite power

surging through his body, so instead he focused all his energy on the task at hand.

Sparks flew from his breath and twinkled in the air.

“Kaaah!”

A vermillion streak shot from his bow. The small arrow became like a meteor and blasted an enormous hole in the giant’s side. Soon, from where it hit, a brilliant golden mushroom burst forth, shining like the sun.

Soon after, Bisco’s second arrow struck the giant on its other side, blasting another huge chunk out of its body. Tetsujin cried out as the two mushrooms ate away at its torso.

“Wow... Amazing...!”

Milo felt as if he were dreaming. It was all too good to be true. His dead partner, returning from Hell, danced through the air, his crimson hair billowing in the wind, his eyes with their emerald gleam, and his body glittering with tiny orange sparks. It was as though the sun itself had taken human form.

“Rrraaarghhh!”

Jumping off from the giant’s left arm, Bisco approached and let loose an arrow right through its heart. The arrow tore off Tetsujin’s entire upper half, which flew backward, skimmed the ground, and crashed into another distant mountain in a great cloud of dust, sending a resounding echo of twisting metal across the land.

“Milo...!”

“Pawoo! Jabi!” Milo called out as the pair rode up on Actagawa. When they spotted Bisco, shining like flames, standing at the bottom of the valley, their eyes went wide with shock.

“Is that...Akaboshi...?!” said Pawoo.

The lower half of Tetsujin collapsed at Bisco’s feet, and with a *Gaboom!* *Gaboom!* shining orange mushrooms began exploding all over its body, scattering the Rust as they unfurled their radiant caps and swelled to full size.

“Rust-Eaters!” Milo gasped. “...And they’re already in their awakened form...!”

“He’s a mushroom god!” cried Jabi. His eyes sparkling like those of a young boy, he let out a dreamlike sigh. “I didn’t think it possible! He’s become a god and returned to us!”

Bisco then leaped up the valley using the Rust-Eater’s caps and landed beside the other three in a cloud of glittering dust.

“...What’s happened to me?” he said. “Whatever arrow I fire, it turns into a Rust-Eater. And I feel stronger... I can’t stop it; it’s like I’m burning up...”

“Those things coming off Bisco...they’re spores! Then, that means...Bisco is...!”

Milo’s thought was interrupted by a great roar coming from the distant mountain. Tetsujin’s top half screamed.

“How is that bastard still alive?” said Bisco. “Get over here, Actagawa!”

“Bisco!” said Milo. “I’m coming with you!”

“Damn right, you are!”

Actagawa sprang into the air with Bisco and Milo atop his back.

“Use this, Bisco!”

Jabi tossed Bisco his own bow. Bisco caught it in one hand and passed his emerald bow over to Milo, grinning.

“That Kurokawa bastard’s a tough one to kill. Let’s put the final nail in his coffin, Milo!”

“Bisco, I think you’ve become half mushroom! When you died from the Pipe Snake’s venom, the Rust-Eater sprouted inside you, and it fed off the Rust inside Tetsujin. Now, it’s—”

“Look, I’m not gonna understand anything if you tell me all at once! Let’s just deal with that oversized action figure first!”

“Don’t you want to know what’s happening to your own body?!”

“As long as you know, that’s good enough for me!”

Bisco flashed the smile Milo knew all too well. Milo watched him, troubled...

“Okay, Bisco!” He grinned.

“All right, Actagawa! We can reach him from here!”

Bisco’s eyes twinkled. He drew his bow, his finishing arrow, about to loose it at the giant’s chest...when both of them noticed something strange.

“Bisco, wait!”

“...What the hell?!”

Tetsujin’s upper half rose and turned to the sky, glowing red-hot, steam belching forth, and bubbling rust filtering from every orifice. It spasmed, as though something was growing inside it, ready to burst.

“What is he doing...?”

“Akaboshiii! Wait, wait, wait! Don’t shoooooot!”

A van drove up at full throttle and stopped beside them. The door opened, and out stumbled a short pink-haired girl, coughing up soot.

““Tirol!”” they both cried.

“I took a look at the blueprints. Found ’em at the military base in Miyagi.” The girl choked out her words and flicked through the thick document in her hand. “To put it in layman’s terms, that thing’s a tickin’ time bomb! If you shoot it now, this whole place’ll be nothin’ but a smokin’ crater, just like Tokyo!”

A rusted motorcycle screeched to a halt behind her, and Pawoo came over and looked at the plans. Jabi hopped off the back seat and atop Actagawa, where he sat quietly.

“I can see that!” cried Bisco. “But what the hell are we supposed to do if we can’t shoot it?!”

Suddenly, Jabi called out. “Watch out! It’s preparin’ its rust breath again!”

The five people and one crab turned to look and saw the bulging red Tetsujin open its mouth and belch forth a burning stream of molten rust like fire.

“Bisco!” Milo cried.

“Got it!”

Bisco scooped up a handful of arrows and fired them into the ground before them. *Gaboom! Gaboom!* Glorious Rust-Eaters blossomed into being, forming a

mushroom wall that protected them from the blast.

“It worked! What amazing power, Bisco!”

“I... I can’t control it...! It just grows so powerfully no matter what I do!”

But Tetsujin’s breath did not stop. The Rust sprayed forth like vomit, crashing against the Rust-Eater mushrooms and coating even the Rust’s natural enemy with a thin layer of brown metal.

“Dammit, at this rate...! Tirol! Don’t you know how to stop it?!”

“I’m tryin’, I’m tryin’! It’s my life on the line, too, ya know!” Tirol flipped through the pages in a frenzy, complaining. “These are all the connections to the core, so where do the commands come from? It ain’t got a fancy computer brain or nothin’, so how can we stop it from blowin’ us all up...?”

Suddenly, a flash of inspiration struck her.

“Wait, I know! The self-destruct is tied to the pilot’s brain! And the device that connects it is hidden inside his noggin! If you hit that and kill the pilot, you can stop the countdown!”

“So we just gotta blow his brains out, huh? Easy.”

“Bisco, no!” said Milo. “The head’s huge, and you don’t know where Kurokawa is! If you miss, the shock from your arrow will cause the whole thing to explode!”

Everyone stole a look toward Tetsujin’s face as its corroding breath continued to blow. Pawoo closed her eyes, gave a sigh, and then turned to Tirol, her perfect features casting an icy glare.

“Then, I just need to break it open first,” she said.

“Pawoo, you can’t!” cried Milo.

“It’s suicide!” said Jabi. “I’ll go with Actagawa!”

“No,” said Pawoo. “You can’t control the crab’s power well enough.” She swung her iron staff and stood there, resolute. “I’m trained in nonlethal takedowns. That’s the purpose of this staff. Only I can shatter the armor without triggering the explosion. It’s as if I’ve been training my whole life for

this moment.”

“Nonlethal takedowns?!” Bisco nearly tripped over himself with shock, and he jabbed his elbow at Milo. “That thing’s a killing machine! Milo, how can your sister spout such bullshit with a straight face?”

“That’s not a very nice thing to say to someone who’s sacrificing her life for you,” Pawoo said, appearing at Bisco’s side. “I don’t ask for much, but I’d appreciate at least a shred of gratitude...”

“Wh-what’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” Pawoo’s uncharacteristic meekness caught Bisco off guard. “Fine, if you come back alive, I’ll give you whatever you want! So don’t make that face; show me the strength of the Vigilante Corps’ captain!”

“...Hmm.” For a second, there was a devilish twinkle in Pawoo’s eyes, and she smiled. “Whatever I want, you say...?”

Suddenly, Pawoo gripped Bisco by the collar with her fearsome strength, drew him in close, and pressed her lips to his. While Bisco struggled to comprehend what was happening, she feasted upon him like a carnivore with its prey caught between its fangs.

“Mmmmmmmmph!!!”

Bisco’s nerves of steel failed him for the first time in his life, and he thrashed about in panic, flapping his arms like a caught pigeon. It was a long time before he managed to break free of her viselike grip, as though barely escaping with his life.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Pawoo gently wiped a thread of saliva from her mouth and laughed from the bottom of her heart. It was a pure, gentle, beautiful laugh, the likes of which even Milo had never heard his sister utter.

“I’m taking my payment in advance, Akaboshi!” she said, wheeling around, casting a flirtatious glance over her shoulder. Milo turned to Bisco with bright, gleeful eyes, but Bisco could do nothing but stand there trembling in fright, like a frightened puppy.

“She’ll make a great wife!” he said. “She’s pretty—and faithful...”

“She’s a beast!”

“With E-cup breasts!”

“Shut up already!” Bisco roared. Milo laughed. Here in this place of despair, somehow his heart was filled with hope. They were not going to die here. Each of them believed in themselves, in the future, with a calm, unconditional resolution.

“Welp, I’ve done all I can. Don’t come back to haunt me if you guys all die here!” said Tirol as she turned to get in her van and leave.

“Tirol! Thank you! You risked your life to help us!” Milo called out. Tirol turned back at him and timidly twirled her hair in her finger. “I-I’m just payin’ ya back for savin’ my life twice! B-besides...”

She gulped, and her face turned bright red.

“Wh-what kinda gal doesn’t help a f-friend in need?”

After she got the words out, she slammed the door shut and drove off. As a stray blob of molten rust fell her way, Jabi leaped up and knocked it away aside a swing of Actagawa’s giant claw.

“Bisco!” he yelled. “We’re finally here! This is what we’ve all been fighting for!”

“Don’t ease up now, old man! If you kick the bucket right at the finish line, I’ll bust into Hell just so I can beat the shit outta you!”

“Enough talk about the afterlife! I’ve had enough of that to last me a lifetime!”

Jabi brimmed with newfound youth, and his eyes twinkled once more.

“Now, let’s put an end to this! Hop aboard, lass!”

“On my way!”

Pawoo leaped atop Actagawa, and Jabi whipped the reins. The giant crab bounded over the wall of Rust-Eaters and circled around to the side of Tetsujin’s face. The iron giant, in anticipation of the sneak attack, halted its rust

breath and swiveled its head around to face them.

“We don’t have much time! It’s fixin’ to blow!”

“Master Jabi. Please throw me!”

“What?!”

“If that thing unleashes its fire breath, it’ll explode. Launch me at its head! Use Actagawa to throw me over there!”

“...Wah-ha-ha-ha! Yer a feisty lass, ain’tcha?” Jabi laughed, then tightened his expression and whipped Actagawa’s reins. “Very well! You want me to send you off with a prayer?”

“No need. I just kissed a god.”

“Then fire away, Actagawa!”

The steelcrab leaped up at Jabi’s signal, gripping Pawoo in his claw, somersaulting through the air like a whirlwind. Then, with his mighty strength, he tossed Pawoo high into the sky. Pawoo’s long hair trailed behind her like the tail of a black comet, and her iron staff shimmered in the bright sunlight.

My staff...

Tetsujin aimed its mouth at Pawoo. The simmering red rust built up in its throat, steaming, ready to burst forth at any moment.

My life... For this moment...!

Her eyes flew open. In that instant, she was wrath incarnate, the warrior woman once more. She spun in midair, swinging her staff down.

“Haaaaaiyaaaaaah!”

Her staff sliced the air twice, cutting the giant’s face in a cross pattern. A pair of clean breaks ran across Tetsujin’s iron mask, before the armor plating simply fell away. Tetsujin let out a cry and shook its head, but it showed no signs of exploding. It appeared Pawoo really had avoided letting the impact carry through to the giant’s flesh.

“Bullshit. She actually did it!” Bisco called over to Milo, unable to hide his shock. “...Wait. She didn’t think about how she was gonna land, did she?!”

But Milo was already drawing his bow and fired a shot toward his sister as she fell. *Pchew!* The arrow lodged itself in Pawoo's staff and grew immediately into a balloonsroom. When Pawoo came to, she found it carrying her gently down through the air like a parachute and aimed herself toward Actagawa. Tetsujin writhed and belched forth flames, but the next of Milo's arrows struck the ground before Actagawa and put up an anchorshroom wall to protect them.

"Hey, that was pretty clean!" said Bisco in admiration at Milo's efforts.

"You could stand to treat me like that more often!" Milo called back in response. "Bisco, look!"

Bisco followed his partner's gaze and looked up at Tetsujin. There, in the titan's exposed face, was a familiar sight. Locked within the area of the giant's brow was a single human figure. It was almost entirely skeletal, flesh eaten away by rust, but for a pair of deep, dark eyes, a testament to the man's obsession that persisted even in death.

"Kurokawa!"

As if hearing Bisco's yell, Kurokawa's hollow face stirred, and his jet-black eyes fell upon him. It could not be said for sure whether any part of the Imihama governor still remained that recognized his archnemesis, but nevertheless, his face twisted in rage.

"AKABOSHI!"

Kurokawa's scream came from the giant's mouth, not his, and caused the air to shake. The deep void of his eyes collided with Bisco's brilliant emerald, and fierce sparks flew between them.

Bisco's arrow left his bow at the same time that Tetsujin unleashed a gout of flames. The hellish inferno torched even the giant's own skin, but when Bisco's realm-splitting arrow met it, it defied the flames like a missile hurtling through the atmosphere.

"We are the same, Akaboshi! You may be strong, you may be right, but just like you, I will never roll over and die!"

Kurokawa's unending obsession rose from the pit of his stomach, and the inferno surged in intensity. His flesh was stripped, his bones became ash, and

flames burst forth from his eyeballs, and yet still his insane fixation showed no signs of ceasing. As his body collapsed, so, too, did Tetsujin's flesh tear open, and the magma-like rust erupted from the cracks. Right before Bisco's unstoppable arrow connected with Kurokawa's head, the infernal flames burned it completely to ash.

"Now, perish!"

The giant's murderous breath picked up speed once more and fell upon the duo, but just before the inferno flayed the flesh from their bones, a King Trumpet mushroom appeared beneath their feet with a *Gaboom!* and launched them high into the air, saving them from the flames before crumbling to ash in their place.

"Go, Bisco!"

Hearing his partner's voice behind him, Bisco took a deep breath and drew back his bowstring. Below him, Tetsujin appeared to have used up all its strength and hung forward lifelessly. This was Bisco's one and only chance to destroy it for good.

However.

Kurokawa's blasted face turned toward him with burned-out eyes. He swung both his melted arms, which tore apart and lashed at him like fiery whips and struck him in the eyes.

"Gah!"

In a moment, Bisco was stripped of his sight, an archer's lifeline, and yet still he drew his bow. He knew that it was do-or-die here, and nothing could prevent him from landing his arrow in Kurokawa's body. With that sole image burning in his mind, he clenched his teeth.

And then he felt a warm touch on his right hand, and the trembling stopped. Then his left hand, too. Though Bisco could see nothing but darkness, he could feel unwavering conviction returning to his heart.

"Archery is two things.

"First, watch closely."

“And the second?”

“Believe.”

“I...,” whispered a clear voice. “I will be your eyes.”

Milo’s hand adjusted his aim ever so slightly. Bisco’s waning strength, his waning determination, flared back to life and set his heart ablaze.

“So: Believe.

“Pull.

“Tightly...”

In the darkness, Bisco held on to his arrow. In it, he felt their spirits shining brightly.



*

“You can hit it, Bisco.”

“Yeah.”

Pchew!

Milo watched as the arrow, clad in shimmering light, sailed gently through the air. It moved with a strange slowness toward Kurokawa’s chest as if being sucked there, and it stuck.

Then, with a tremendous noise, the arrow tore a perfect hole in the giant’s head, leaving no trace of Kurokawa. Scattering its spores, it flew on, boring clean through not only Tetsujin but the mountain behind.

Gaboom! Gaboom! A chorus of Rust-Eater mushrooms burst to life all across Tetsujin, the plain, the mountain, everything the arrow’s shock wave touched. Tetsujin struggled but was ultimately crushed beneath a pile of mushrooms.

“Ooooooooooh!”

Tetsujin gave a long, drawn-out death cry, but it, too, was gradually drowned out by the sounds of the exploding Rust-Eaters, until it could be heard no more. And thus, the engine of destruction that once laid waste to Japan met its end.

And the endless force of nature overcame the noxious Rust and used it to grow new life.

The pair landed gently atop the caps of the Rust-Eater mushrooms, badly beaten but still alive. As the mushrooms swelled ever larger, they knew they had to escape, but neither of them had the strength to do so any longer. They could barely even lift a single finger.

“Can you get up, Milo?”

“No!”

“Me neither!”

Despite their injuries, the two Mushroom Keepers laughed out loud in satisfaction at their victory.

“Bisco!”

“Yeah?”

“Did I help? You think I’m good enough to be your partner now?!”

Milo’s voice was barely audible over the growing rumble. Bisco gave one final grin and responded:

“I’m your arrow, and you’re my bow! Together, we’re unstoppable!”

The mushroom upon which the pair lay began to tremble, quaking in anticipation of its sudden growth. Milo used the last of his strength to roll over onto his side, nestled up to Bisco, and threw his arm around him.

Gaboom!

The outbreak of mushrooms converted an entire tract of the desolate wasteland into a vibrant forest of Rust-Eaters. One particularly large specimen marked the spot where Tetsujin fell, humming with an ever-so-gentle glow as it scattered radiant spores. All who gazed upon it were struck dumb by the otherworldly sight.

“...It’s so beautiful...,” said Pawoo, standing frozen amid the showering spores. Removing her skullcap, she tossed it aside, letting her gorgeous long black hair fall to the ground.

We won. We actually won.

The blazing fortress of giant mushrooms seared its image into her pupils, causing her eyelids to quiver.

“Lass, you’re okay!”

Actagawa scuttled over in a cloud of sand and skidded to a halt. Jabi clambered down from the saddle and rushed to her side, tripping over his own feet in excitement.

“You did well to survive that!” he said. “You’re quite an impressive young lady!”

“I’m glad you’re safe, too, Jabi,” replied Pawoo.

“...Wait, your face!” he said, pointing at her in shock.

Pawoo brought her hand to her face. The Rust that had spread halfway across it was completely gone, eaten away by the tumbling spores and replaced with pristine porcelain-white skin.

“Ah...!”

“What a pretty young thing,” spoke Jabi with a sigh, enraptured by the sight. “You shouldn’t be out here, swinging a staff.”

“It’s all thanks to your son,” said Pawoo, looking back over at the mushroom forest. “He saved me... He saved you. Right at the very end...he saved everyone. All of humanity...”

Suddenly, Jabi flew into a panic. “Ah! That damn fool! Don’t tell me he’s kicked the bucket already! Your brother, too!”

Pawoo chuckled softly and pointed far out into the sky, at the very peak of the mushroom fortress. Jabi followed her finger up to the cap of the tallest mushroom, scraping the clouds, and saw two minuscule human figures looking back down at them.

“Ah! It’s Bisco! Biscooo! He’s alive, the silly boy! That’s the second time today he’s made me think he died!” Jabi jumped for joy, clapping his hands. “No, wait. How are they gonna get down? We need to help them!”

Jabi leaped toward Actagawa, but Pawoo caught him by the scruff of the neck and pulled him near. He looked up at her with surprise and confusion, but she simply placed her finger mischievously to her lips.

“Wait a little while longer, please. If I let you interrupt them now, I doubt my brother will ever speak to me again.”

“Wh-what on earth are you blabbering about?”

“I’m his sister. I understand.”

Pawoo smiled softly and looked back up toward the sky. Their two cloaks fluttered in the wind, and the sun’s light cast two long shadows across the mushroom forest.

“...We only set out to save two people...,” said Milo, his blue hair looking as if it were about to dissolve into the sky itself. “...and look what happened. With all these Rust-Eaters, we could save not only all of Imihama, but the whole of Japan!”

“Well, go big or go home, that’s what I say.”

“That’s because you lack the finesse to go small.”

“I do not! I’m a man of many talents.”

“They say a jack-of-all-trades is a master of none.”

“Is that anything to say to the man who saved Japan? Huh?”

“Look, Bisco! Everyone’s waving at us!”

Cheers rang out from the ground below as the surviving Vigilante Corps members gathered to sing praise to their heroes. They no longer feared the mushrooms. Instead, their faces were filled with victorious smiles.

Bisco walked up beside Milo, but his eyes had not fully recovered from Kurokawa’s attack, and he was unable to make out anything more than the general ambience.

“Argh. I can’t see a thing. What else is happening down there?”

“Um... All the vigilantes have gathered around Pawoo and are tossing her into the air! Ah-ha-ha! Tirol’s trying to load all the Rust-Eaters onto a truck! Actagawa... He’s chasing one of the iguanas around, and Jabi’s...”

Bisco sat down beside Milo atop the cap of the giant mushroom and closed his eyes, listening. Milo spoke on and on, with a gentle expression and joy in his voice.

“...Well? What’s the old man doing?”

“Bisco.”

“Hmm?”

Milo suddenly thrust his head into Bisco’s chest, throwing him off-balance. He opened his mouth to protest, but then he felt something warm and wet against his skin.

“...Your heartbeat. You really are alive...”

“...I told you, didn’t I? When we die, we die together.”

“Don’t... Don’t ever leave me behind again, Bisco...!”

The tears he had been holding back finally spilled forth, soaking into Bisco’s clothes. Milo’s sobs became louder and louder, until he was bawling in Bisco’s arms like a baby. Bisco searched for something to say, eventually realizing he really did lack finesse, and opted to stay silent. He simply sat there as Milo cried, and a strong gust of wind tousled his scarlet hair. Eventually, the light

that beamed down on them took on an orange hue, and the sun sank down below the distant horizon.

The official stance from the national government was that the mysterious explosion at the North Miyagi Military Base, as well as the nearby emergence of a new mushroom forest, were both the doing of the country's most wanted, the notorious criminal, the Man-Eating Redcap, Bisco Akaboshi.

Following this incident, the new prefectural governor of Imihama, Pawoo, declared the region's independence from the Japanese government. She denounced the persecution of the Mushroom Keepers that occurred all across the country and announced that her prefecture would be open for all Mushroom Keepers to seek refuge from oppression.

Though the Mushroom Keepers were skeptical at first, any disbelief was washed away when they saw the figure of their hero standing beside her, stroking his white beard. Imihama became a marvelous city unlike any other, where its citizens lived side by side with the Mushroom Keepers, and its prosperity continued well into the current day.

The improved Rust-Eater vaccine, developed under the supervision of the newly rebuilt Panda Clinic, was not sold for massive profits like the old medicine but instead given away for next to nothing, not only to all citizens of Imihama but exported to neutral prefectures such as Shimobuki, Iwate, and Akita, freeing countless people from the weighty specter of the Rust. However, the whereabouts of the miracle-worker physician, Dr. Panda himself, were never made public, dashing the hopes and dreams of all the bright young medical apprentices across the land who flocked to Imihama in the hopes of receiving his tutelage.

While Imihama's declaration of independence shook the nation, there was another small incident going on around the same time that ended up relegated to obscurity. At the southern edge of Gunma Prefecture, at a checkpoint on the border of the Saitama Iron Desert. Let's wrap up our story with the details of

this particular event.

THE MAN-EATING REDCAP, BISCO AKABOSHI, read the wanted poster hanging on the checkpoint wall. It showed a man with spiky red hair, a cracked pair of cat-eye goggles, and a bright-red tattoo around his right eye. Below, where it once said REWARD: 800,000 SOLS, there were now several red lines drawn through the eight hundred thousand, and below were scribbled the words ABOUT 2,000,000. It was a piece of paper you could find almost anywhere in Japan, an incredibly familiar sight to anyone who hadn't been living under a rock.

But beside that poster was a second one, relatively new and clean, neatly held in place with a thumbtack. Blue hair as clear as a cloudless sky. Childlike yet well-structured features and a pair of bright, wide eyes. He was easily mistakable for a woman, and the dark-black mark around his left eye gave him all the appearances of a friendly panda.

A pair of pilgrims stared at the posters as they lingered by the checkpoint. A tired-looking border official stuck his head out the window and called to them.

"What's the matter, never seen one of Akaboshi's posters before?"

"...No, I'm looking at this one," replied one of the pilgrims, holding back the tremor in his voice. He regained his composure and turned to the guard. "*The Man-Eating Panda*, they call him. Why do you suppose that is?"

"Can't ya tell just by lookin' at 'im?" replied the hairy guard, looking very pleased at the chance to talk about the poster. He grinned as he took a swig of brandy from a bottle. "'e's the doctor of the Panda Clinic, Milo Nekoyanagi. Apparently 'e used to work in Imihama, but truth was 'e would kill 'is patients and eat 'em. Look at 'is face, too. Wouldn't hurt a fly, or so you'd think... Guess you can't even trust a doctor these days."

As the bearded guard waxed on and on, the other pilgrim tried to stifle a laugh. His partner jabbed him in the stomach with his elbow and coughed politely before replying.

"...Like you say, he really doesn't look evil at all," he said, astonished.

"Gah-ha-ha-ha! ...Yer not alone! Perhaps I shouldn't be sayin' this, as a government official an' all, but most people think the same way you do. I heard

'e was a good doctor, who went against the government and healed people for free, an' this was how the government repaid 'im."

He spoke with a smile, finished stamping the paperwork, and handed it back to the first monk, staring longingly at the sky as he did so.

"Akaboshi... I don't think 'e was such a bad guy, neither. Sure, 'e looked like 'e'd eat you given 'alf the chance, but I think 'e just 'ad 'is own way o' doin' things..."

When he saw the guard's expression, gazing gently into space as if daydreaming, the first monk looked over at his partner and smiled. Though, *partner* was perhaps an overly familiar term for the second monk, who merely shrugged without any particular show of emotion.

"Open the gate!" bellowed the guard.

As the gate slowly ground open, it revealed a cluster of small ferns and thinning grass covering the desert and the walls. It was astonishing to think that life was gradually returning to this place that, just one year ago, had seemed like an entrance into death itself, a land devoid of all life, ruled by rust and sand. However, given that months at a time could pass without seeing a single visitor to this checkpoint, it was likely that the hairy guard and his companion, Ota, were the only ones who knew that.

With a bow of thanks, the first monk quickly hopped atop their dog-drawn cart and disappeared through the gate, while the other approached the window, pulled out a pair of orange vials from inside his pocket, and placed them on the counter.

"What're these?" said the guard.

"Rust-Eater vaccines from Imihama," said the monk, his green eyes catching the official off guard. "Consider them a gift. One for you and one for your friend."

"H-how did you get these...?!" stammered the border guard before gruffly shooting back, "I—I can't take bribes from monks! I work for the government!"

"I see you gave that King Trumpet mushroom hippo dung once a week," the pilgrim said, grinning and casting a glance at the signs of nature returning to the

border. “Call this your reward for doing as I asked—and quit complaining, pork chop.”

“...Ah. Ah... Ah!” The hairy guard’s eyes widened three times in succession. That unforgettable, indomitable smile. That gleaming tooth. “Y-y-you! It’s you!”

The monk ran away cackling, leaped atop the roof of his dog-drawn cart, and gave the cloth-covered load in the back a poke. A second later, the cloth hurtled into the air and out popped a giant steelcrab who grabbed the two pilgrims in his claws and landed on the ground with a thud.

“Ota! Ota! It’s Akaboshi! Akaboshi’s here!”

The two pilgrims looked back at the noisy checkpoint, where it was impossible to say if the guard was shouting in anger or excitement, and tore off their bandages, revealing heads of scarlet and sky-blue hair. Bisco turned to Milo and said:

“Man-Eating Panda.”

“Stop it! I don’t eat people...”

Milo sat in the front saddle, holding the reins, puffing his cheeks, when suddenly his face brightened, and he leaned over to Bisco, slapping him on the back repeatedly.

“Bisco! Look, he’s taking a picture! Say cheese!”

“Huh?!”

“Hurry!”

Just as the two turned to face Ota’s camera far off behind them, Actagawa sprang over a small hill, and the three of them disappeared from view.

“Hey, Bisco? Do you really want to cure that?”

“Of course I do. I don’t remember askin’ to be immortal. If Jabi ain’t got a clue what’s causin’ it, we’ll just have to check all the Mushroom Keeper settlements one by one until we find someone who does.”

“But you’re a super-duper Rust-Eater man! It’d be such a shame to cure it!”

“Think about how I feel! It’s weird bein’ half mushroom! It creeps me out.

Besides, I keep findin' mushrooms in my hair... Ah, there's another one."

"Wait, don't take it out! It makes you look really cute!"

"...The hell?"

"Well, okay then. I don't really want to grow old without you, either. But it's not going to be an easy journey."

"Maybe. But it'll all work out in the end. Because..."

"Because...?"

"...Because when the two of us team up, we're invincible."

"...Heh... Right you are!"

"You set me up for that one. How many times are you gonna make me say it today? That's enough, isn't it?"

"No, it's not! You never normally say anything nice about me, so I'm saving them up!"

"...Does it work like that? Wait, no, don't save them up! That can't be good for you!"

The young border guard, Ota, had used his hidden talent to capture a once-in-a-lifetime shot of the two Man-Eaters, side by side. Nekoyanagi's innocent smiling face was accompanied by a pair of bent fingers, throwing up a lazy peace sign, and by his side, the mad dog Akaboshi scowled, raising his middle finger to the camera. The photo was perfect for a new set of wanted posters, but it was never submitted to the prefectural bureau. Instead, it was set in a nice white frame and stayed at the border checkpoint in a corner of Ota's desk.

AFTERWORD

So I guess I like post-apocalyptic worlds.

If I look through the novels, manga, and games on my shelves, there's quite a few where the world has ended. I wonder why.

Lately, I've started to come up with grandiose-sounding reasons like "Because it's only in a world of ruin that the power of life can truly shine!" and such.

The Mohawks from *Fist of the North Star* are a good example. I know they're supposed to be the bad guys, but they know what they want and chase after it, unrestrained and undoubting, every day glittering with sweat and excitement over the loot they're going to plunder today.

"Hya-ha! Water!" they cry! Such optimism, even though we all know Kenshiro is going to tear them to shreds three seconds later. I can't help but feel somewhat enamored with those silly little guys, weak and unfortunate though they are. They live fast and leave pretty corpses. They transcend good and evil; they're pure, transient forces of nature.

That's the kind of feeling I tried to instill in the world and characters of *Sabikui Bisco*. (And I don't mean in their superficial qualities like their looks or their silly voices... I'm talking about their hearts!) I tried to have them inherit the brilliant life energy of the Mohawks.

I could handle the world, but I wondered how to write the heroes. What made the heroes different from the Mohawks? In my mind, it was that the heroes had a mission. Something on which to focus their limitless life energy. That could be many things. Depending on the themes of the story, it could be "justice" or "ambition."

For the characters in *Bisco*, I gave them "love."

Now, *love* is a very complicated word. For *Sabikui Bisco*, I defined it as strong

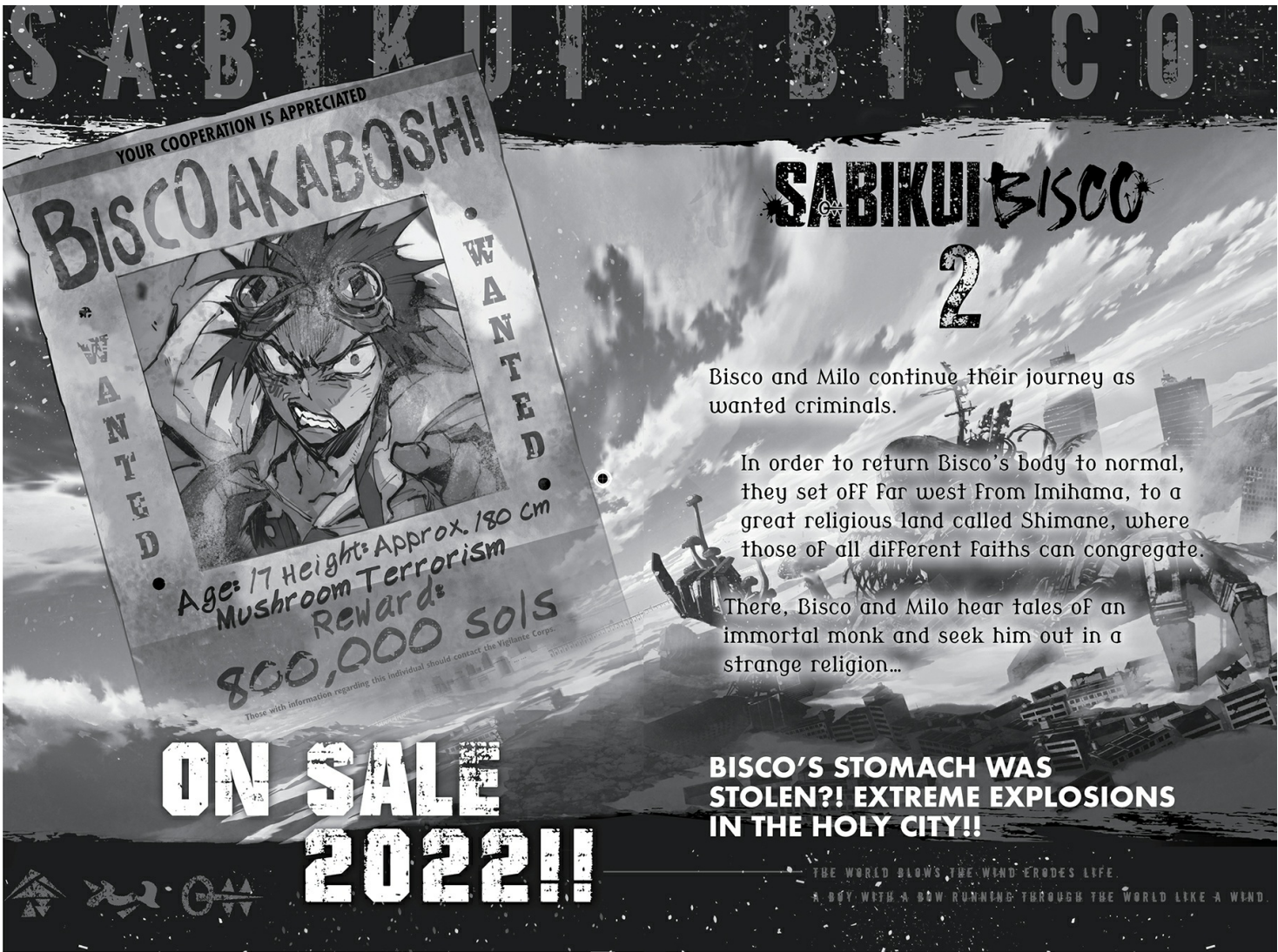
feelings between one person and another (so that included things like hate and obsession). It's all for love that these seven characters run through this twilight world, risking their lives and growing beaten and bloodied. They're barbarians. They have no respect for society. They simply cannot think of anything but their love.

Even today, if you find something you love (be it a person, a job, art, or even writing) and stake your life on it, you can endure any pain. And every time you do, you shine brilliantly.

That's the sort of love I wanted to write about—and whose praises I sang in writing the characters of this book. If their pure, single-minded devotion gives strength to any of my readers, then as an author I can ask for no greater happiness...

...And with that, I will draw this afterword to an end. See you next time.

—*Shinji Cobkubo*



SABIKU BISCO

YOUR COOPERATION IS APPRECIATED

BISCO AKABOSHI

WANTED

WANTED

Age: 17 Height: Approx. 180 cm
Mushroom Terrorism
Reward: 800,000 SOLS

Those with information regarding this individual should contact the Vigilance Corps.

SABIKU BISCO

2

Bisco and Milo continue their journey as wanted criminals.

In order to return Bisco's body to normal, they set off far west from Imihama, to a great religious land called Shimane, where those of all different faiths can congregate.

There, Bisco and Milo hear tales of an immortal monk and seek him out in a strange religion...

**ON SALE
2022!!**

**BISCO'S STOMACH WAS
STOLEN?! EXTREME EXPLOSIONS
IN THE HOLY CITY!!**

THE WORLD BLOWS THE WIND ERODES LIFE.
A BOY WITH A BOW RUNNING THROUGH THE WORLD LIKE A WIND.

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